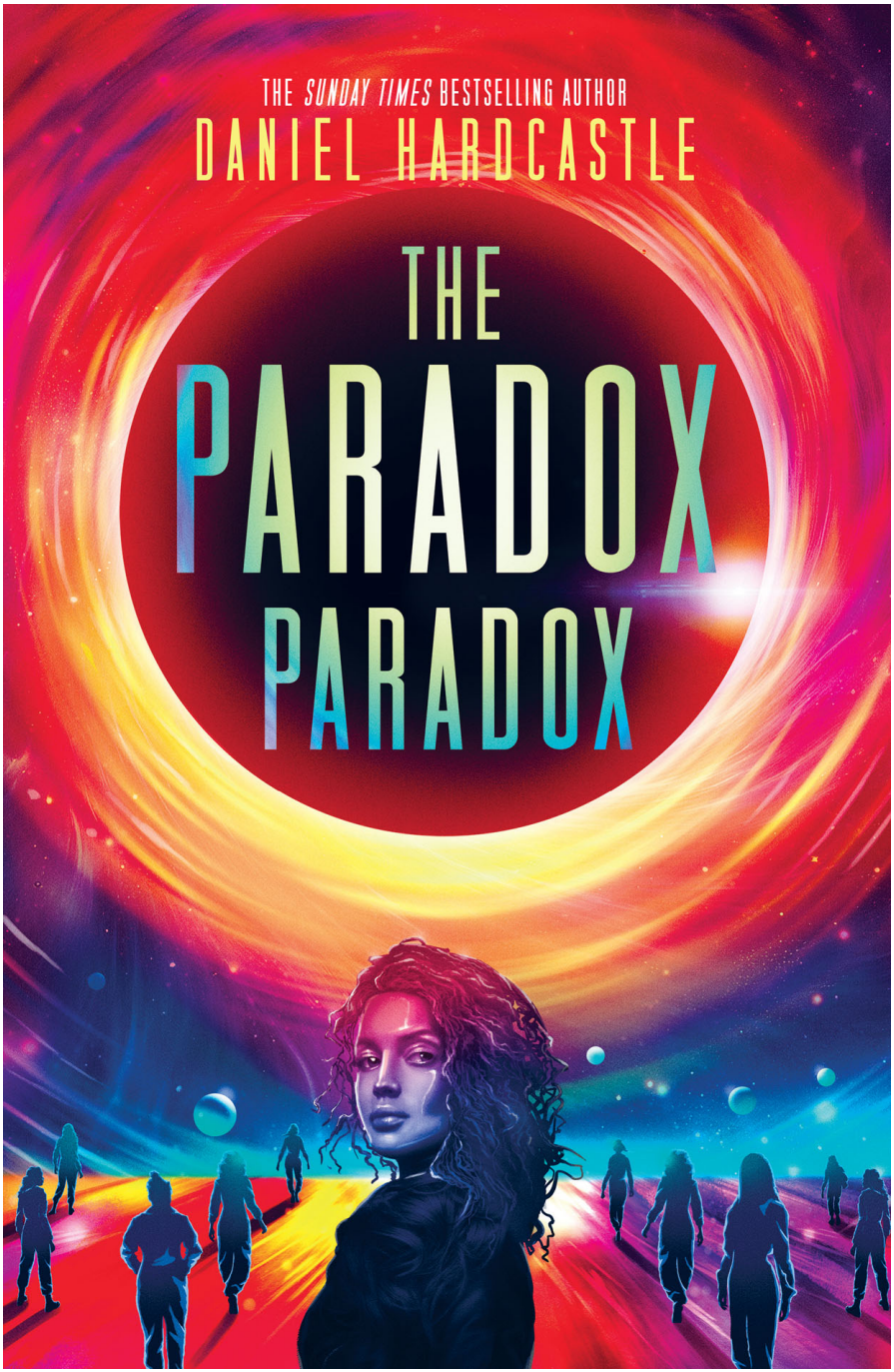
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DANIEL HARDCASTLE
THE PARADOX PARADOX

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fuck Yeah, Video Games

THE PARADOX PARADOX

DANIEL HARDCASTLE

unbound

For Rebecca

‘*Rail travel at high speed is not possible.*’

Dr Dionysius Lardner, 1830

‘*I can state flatly that heavier than air flying machines are impossible.*’

Lord Kelvin, 1895

‘There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable.’

Albert Einstein, 1932

‘*I have experimental evidence that time travel is not possible*.’

Steven Hawking, 2012

Class of 2783

‘When people look back at 2783, they’ll likely remember the Betelgeuse evacuations that dominated many a headline. For myself, I shall remember my beloved class, pictured here during our annual “Dress like a 21st-Century Nerd” day, and their promise that, if time travel is ever invented, they’ll all band together and support a historic novel during its backing phase, thus altering the timeline irrevocably. Good luck kids!’

Mr Hardcastle, Class Teacher for Remedial Adults

	Name: Abbie the trans girl **Greatest achievement:** Concealed an entire briefcase in my hair. **What’s next:** Using the above fact for crime. *‘People with short hair are cowards! Cowards I say!’* **Sir Isaac Newton**
	Name: Dean & Mandy Barrett (Zumi & Kia) **Greatest achievement:** Successfully exchanged parts of our brains with other living humans, as a prank. **What’s next:** Documenting their spiral as they realise they can now only enjoy our terrible taste in movies. *‘Why’s there a bloody scalpel in the sink?’* **Someone who is soon to become a major fan of Dragonball Evolution**
	Name: Harm Broeren **Greatest achievement:** Avenged my village. **What’s next:** Clearing out some side quests. *‘Without a clear indicator of intent, any Nordic persons can be mistaken by some people for a Skyrim cosplay’* **Ulfric’s Law**
	Name: Sorio Caddell **Greatest achievement:** Completed work experience in Earth’s currency vaults, personally overseeing the historic US Dollar strongrooms. **What’s Next:** Vegas. *‘I’m going to the one place that hasn’t been corrupted by capitalism . . . SPACE!’* **Premier Cherdenko**

	Name: Jennifer Campbell **Greatest achievement:** Re-created a long-extinct organism from genetic material, mostly on purpose. **What's next:** Replicating this method until I have my own dinosaur. *'Okay, this time it'll all be fine'* **Dr Ian Malcolm, Jurassic Universe II: Raptors Versus Aliens**
	Name: Grant Cousins **Greatest achievement:** Successfully modded Mario into over 45,000 video games. **What's next:** More of the same, let's-a-go! Wahoo! *'Cease and Desist'* **Front of letters I refuse to open**
	Name: Jessica Cronin **Greatest achievement:** My band, Ecophagy Overdrive, desolated a ten mile area around itself after a guitar solo. **What's next:** Attempting to de-orbit a planet, mid-gig. *'I'm afraid you're just too darn loud'* **Huey Lewis**
	Name: Brandon Elliott **Greatest achievement:** Defeated alien robots while dressed as a Roman soldier. **What's next:** Moving to New York City with my red-haired partner. *'Rory Williams? I have no idea who that is. Why do people keep asking me about him?'* **Me**
	Name: Aryan Ellis **Greatest achievement:** Wrote twenty bestselling holo-novels, each one more erotic than the last. **What's next:** Currently finishing up work on [EXPLICIT TITLE REMOVED BY EDITOR]. *'That's no moon . . .'* **Derek Butterfingers, lead character, Escape from Planet Bum**
	Name: Matthew Kavan Gallagher **Greatest achievement:** Hosted a popular hospital radio show for half a decade. **What's next:** Would love to move it from the animal hospital that currently hosts it to a people hospital. *'Another request for Puppy Love? audible sighing'* **Matthew Gallagher, host of The Bow-wow Power Hour**

Name: Coire Halfpenny
Greatest achievement: Learned to summon snakes with the power of my mind.
What's next: Expedition to find and train a Dune worm.
'Sssssssssssssssssss'

Snakespeare

Name: Cole Hicks
Greatest achievement: Passed Mega-structure Engineering with a structural collapse rate of less than 40 per cent.
What's next: Applying to construct a suspension bridge between Earth and the moon.
'If there isn't a bridge there, it's not worth visiting'

Isambard Kingdom Brunel

Name: Joshua Jones II Electric Bugaboo
Greatest achievement: Tripled the size of my dog for my coursework.
What's next: Quadrupling the size of my dog.
'Do you think my dog is too small?'

Me

Name: Ben Land
Greatest achievement: Designed the first light-speed rollercoaster.
What's next: I plan to open my own theme park, Ben Land.
'This park is really clean and tidy'

Guest 168

Name: Sam Lewis
Greatest achievement: Aattached my head, surgically, into a large orb of late 1900s/early 2000s popular culture.
What's next: I'm going to roll around a local toy convention, absorbing whatever I can into my collective.
'Tea, Earl Grey, hot'

Captain James T. Kirk.

Name: Alex Loria
Greatest achievement: Completed the Luna Circumference Ultra-Marathon in 51 days, ten hours, and fourteen minutes.
What's next: The Kepler-10c Circumference Ultra-Marathon.
'You can't be running from something if you end up back where you started'

Pythagoras, during his Marathon phase

	Name: Mike Morgillo **Greatest achievement:** Obtained the world's first prescription lenses for my future-seeing lazy third eye. **What's Next:** Dunno. *'Please read the letters on the chart that I have yet to put on the wall'* **My psyoptometrist**
	Name: Phil Pagano **Greatest achievement:** Came up with the mathematical equation for 'dapperness'. **What's next:** I wish to learn how to travel to the shops and back without strangers swooning at the sight of me. *'What, this old thing?'* **Oscar Wilde**
	Name: Ethan Pender **Greatest achievement:** Completed an entire playthrough of Twilight Imperium: Twenty-Fourth Edition in a single sitting. **What's next:** Using the skills I've learned to wage war on a galactic scale. *'Not my finest hour'* **Winston Churchill, after flipping the board during a game of Monopoly**
	Name: Dammit Peter **Greatest achievement:** Completed therapy to reject the belief that I am the messiah. **What's next:** Continuing my work on teleporting flowing water between planets. *'First time catching a stream!'* **Christ**
	Name: Artemis Potter **Greatest achievement:** Took part in the 2782 tour of the Jewel Planet Revue, featuring Cherlactus. **What's next:** I plan to be the first person to lip-sync to Time Warp while actually warping in time. *'I turned back time. I found a way. All humans will tremble before Cherlactus!'* **Cherlactus**
	Name: Patrick Quinn **Greatest achievement:** Invented a machine that rearranges the visible light spectrum into alphabetical order. **What's next:** I will petition the government to swap all rainbows to this system. *'Battle Gave In Of Richard Vain York'* **A useful mnemonic**

Name: Daniel R
Greatest achievement: Being part of the team that discovered the lost city of Basildon.
What's next: Assisting in its re-burial.
'Susie is a slag'
Ancient graffiti found on-site

Name: Kelly Roberts
Greatest Achievement: Classified.
What's Next: Classified.
'I'm just a simple tailor'
Elim Garak

Name: Josie Salisbury
Greatest achievement: Exposed the subliminal message in the Windows 95 start-up sound.
What's next: Remaining in hiding while the preserved head of Bill Gates continues to hunt me down.
'The Dot-Com Bubble will never burst . . .'
Windows 95, hidden message

Name: Lily Stewart (Euclid)
Greatest achievement: Passed an additional three classes with top honours after accidentally walking into the wrong lecture halls.
What's next: Continuing further education as I look for the way out.
'Theoretical Physics? Is this not the Party Planning lecture? Well, I'll sit in anyway, can't hurt'
Albert Einstein

Name: Bjorn van Rijszen
Greatest achievement: Owns the largest collection of Nerd[3] memorabilia in the galaxy.
What's next: Will continue explaining to strangers on busses exactly what a Nerd[3] was.
'Why am I still doing this? I long for death'
Nerd[3]'s classic introduction, circa 2114

Name: Aidan Ward
Greatest Achievement: Beard.
What's Next: Going into production with my invention, the Zero-G Beard Tether™.
'Outer space? With this beard?!'
Abraham Lincoln

Due to an unfortunate accident involving the speed of light and some matches, the following students were not visible at the time of taking photos. This effect should hopefully wear off in the next five to ten years.

	Name: Sabine-Ellie-Ava Black **Greatest achievement:** Travelled to the Arctic to scrape off some of the excess ice. **What's Next:** Doing the same thing to my freezer. *'Bugger this, I'm building an ark'* **David Attenborough**
	Name: Justin Jankunas **Greatest achievement:** I was successful in the elimination of a shape-changing parasite on-board my starship. **What's next:** I will return to Earth to shake hands with as many humans as possible. I will not elaborate further. *'Quotes are irrelevant'* **My collective**
	Name: Alan Plowman **Greatest achievement:** Made great strides in training a bull to successfully navigate a china shop. **What's next:** Continuing my work, pending discovery of another willing china shop. *'THIS IS SO MUCH WORSE THAN THE SAYING PREPARED ME FOR'* **The last willing china-shop owner**
	Name: Griffin Watson **Greatest achievement:** Have surfed seas made from almost every liquid element, bro. **What's next:** I'm gonna shred across KELT-9b. *'Drop in, just smack the lip, WOBAHH, drop down, SHHHBAH!'* **Jane Austen**

The following contents page uses Flashback Lock™ technology, re-arranging chapter numbers into a simple, chronological order for the convenience of the reader. The earliest events of the story will be Chapter One, no matter when they appear in the novel itself. *Flashback Lock™: Because nobody likes remembering dates.*

Flashback Lock™ technology has been scientifically tested to reduce headaches, nosebleeds, and yells of 'oh for fuck's sake' as you thumb back to a previous chapter to try and work out in what order any of this is happening. Side effects of Flashback Lock™ technology include an inability to think unlinearly, ruptures in causality, and bloating. If used across multiple timelines, Flashback Lock™ may produce inaccurate results. Please consult your doctor before or after using Flashback Lock™ technology.

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Acknowledgements
Supporters
A Note on the Author

Synchronisation

//Begin

Hello, valued reader.

Congratulations on your purchase of **The Paradox Paradox**, *the latest book from the galaxy's finest publisher, Unbound Technologies. For this book to function at its optimum settings, we shall now perform a brief, invasive scan of your brain. Please state at this time if you wish to opt out of this examination, or if any of the following particularly sensitive topics should be avoided. Embarrassing memories. Fetishes. Political opinions. Political fetishes.*

//Running the zero-response protocol …

Thank you for your lack of reply. Commencing scan.

//Scanning …
//Scan complete. Wow, that was fast. You should read more.
//Analysing …
//Reporting.

Based on your understanding of fashion, celebrity crushes, and musical tastes, Unbound Technologies estimate that you are currently residing in the year 1997. References in the book shall be updated.

To assist with your detected attention deficit disorder, a small electric shock will fire every time you look away from the page. WARNING: Please ***do not*** *read this book in the bath.*

Medical status report: Unbound Technologies estimate your lifespan to be approximately …

//ALERT: POSSIBLE INTERNET ERA USER DETECTED.
//ACTIVATE PEDANT RESPONSE PROGRAM.
//LAUNCHING PEDANT.

ATTENTION: Further scans have revealed that you are from the era of the human race that experimented with the idea of an 'internet'. We offer our deepest condolences.

To assist your reading today, Unbound Technologies have activated PEDANT, a Pleasure Enriching Digital Assistant with a Neural Tether. This artificial intelligence will monitor your reading of the book and, if at any point it detects you are lapsing into your regular, comfortable state of anhedonia, will attempt to compensate, allowing you once again to remember what joy feels like.

An example. Say that you are reading the book and you find a hairline fracture in the lore. Now, normally this would be a day entirely written off. You'd have to write the novel-length one-star rated review for various websites, record the rant video explaining how exactly this proves that the author has never been loved, and then argue further about it in lengthy comments on social media. Hours, days, possibly even weeks of your finite time alive absolutely and completely wasted. However, with PEDANT, these events will no longer occur. At the slightest hint of a three-hour vlog forming in your mind, PEDANT will activate and offer up a concise, re-aligning factoid in the form of a footnote, to extinguish the surprising amount of anger welling up inside your soul. Thanks to PEDANT, you will no longer die a meaningless husk whose entire contribution to society will be wiped away when an old server is switched off. You will now be able to seek a fuller life, full of riches of the heart and mind, as well as fast cars and very potent drugs. With PEDANT, you can't afford to ***not*** *buy our books.*

So with all that said, it's time to sit back, relax, and at least try to enjoy **The Paradox Paradox**.

//End

PART I

Chapter Two

The Last Billionaire

LONDON, ENGLAND | 2034

Three months after killing himself, Austin Lang was sitting in his flat, absentmindedly stirring uneaten cereal around in his bowl. With a heavy sigh he stood and tramped over to his kitchen, dust spiralling around in his wake. He scraped the majority of the gradually cementing stodge into the bin, filled the bowl with water, and lied to himself that he was leaving it to soak. Austin returned to his chair, sat heavily, and stared up at the camera in the dustiest corner of his small living room. It stared back at him, unblinking, digitising the light rebounding off him and flinging a mathematical representation of it at a nearby computer, which in turn shot it towards several livestreaming servers across the planet in less time than it took Austin to sigh. There wasn't a single inch of his flat, bathroom included, that wasn't covered by several cameras. Nestled between books, taped to the ceiling, and even two or three under the bed for good measure. All of them broadcasting Austin to the world. Receiving this footage were thousands of people, all transfixed by the man who silently livestreamed his life, never leaving his grotty little flat, never even speaking. Questions filled the parts of the internet with nothing better to do. Is this an art piece? An advert? What's with all the caged birds? People wanted answers and, after a few months, someone got clever. His windows were boarded-up, but a small crack in one of the planks of wood cast a thin strip of sunlight across his floor once a day. This was enough to work out his time zone – GMT – and then his rough area based on clouds softening the light: London. Then, with a bit of computer modelling, the exact layout of his flat was created and cross-referenced against all available planning blueprints until a match was found. A small block of flats, right at the arse end of the Isle of Dogs, and just outside the outskirts of the disaster that had levelled the majority of London earlier that year. Less than two hours later, a group of fans was outside Austin's apartment block, wearing the required gas masks, holding up placards, and livestreaming the gathering to thousands more. On the feed, Austin didn't react. He didn't even seem

to notice when they let off fireworks. After a while, one of the particularly popular and floppy-haired live streamers forced his way inside the building and waltzed right up to Austin's door. With his live chat egging him on, the influencer knocked on the door and triggered the automated warning about the sheer quantity of explosives hidden in the basement. Everyone made it out, blue hair singed, but the building, one of the last in the area, was razed to the ground.

Ninety miles away, in an exact replica of a small block of flats from right at the arse end of the Isle of Dogs, a notification appeared on one of Austin Lang's computer screens. He shuffled over to it and read the notification. As he did, a thin strip of light from the fake sunlight system he'd built illuminated the smile on his face.

The block of flats wasn't the only thing to explode that day. Austin's viewership shot from the thousands into the millions as his existence hit the mainstream. One of the websites he was streaming to, after quite a bit of pressure from several hashtags, decided to cut his feed off. Within five minutes they'd received a warning. Within ten, their headquarters collapsed mysteriously, as did the houses of the majority of their shareholders. Austin's face became inescapable. For the next twenty-four hours, he was all anyone could talk about. TV stations broadcast his feed, newspapers slathered his face onto their front pages, and three streaming platforms announced a movie about all of this. Out of the almost 8.9 billion people on planet earth, a billion of them were watching. It was now or never.

Austin stopped staring into the small camera that sat inside his perpetually empty fridge and started to cover his bird cages with whatever fabric he had lying around. As he lifted the cover over the last cage, one containing three tawny owls, the feed skipped. Every camera, every stream jumped, and Austin went from raising up the blanket to being doubled over in pain on the floor. He screamed, silently obliterating a camera as he lay there, smashing it over and over again against the hardwood floor. A few moments later, the pain seemed to have passed. Austin stood, his face thunderous, and climbed up onto his bed, yanking out the power cables of every camera he could grab. Slowly and methodically, he made his way across the apartment, killing feeds as he went. The streams started to go dark. While wrestling with the last camera, a wide-angled number which was tied to one of the blades of his broken ceiling fan with a USB cable, Austin paused. He scrunched his eyebrows and cocked his ear before turning to look at something off camera, an expression of

surprise on his face. After a moment, the fan rotated, revealing what Austin was looking at. A man was standing in Austin's flat. He took a step forwards, holding out his hands to show that he was unarmed. He spoke briefly, but even lip-readers couldn't work out what he was saying from the grainy footage. Austin, now only seen from the back of the head, nodded at the stranger's words, walked over to his cutlery drawer, pulled a gun out, and blew his own brains out, live, in front of billions of people.

The feed died with him.

Several months later an urban explorer broke into an abandoned, creaking manor house just outside of Chippenham, Wiltshire. Inside, she found that the floors, ceilings, and walls had been removed, hollowing out almost the entire manor, and in their place, suspended on huge steel supports, was an exact replica of a small block of flats from right at the arse end of the Isle of Dogs. She recognised Austin's apartment and fled, ripping off a knitted glove with her teeth to call in an anonymous tip as she ran. Moments later, the front of the manor lit up with flashing blue lights as hundreds of Wiltshire's finest stormed one of the most recognisable crime scenes of the twenty-first century. They found nothing. No blood, no body, no birds. Austin Lang fell into the pages of history, and a few hundred years later, vanished from them altogether.

However, moments after the first policeman had set foot on the property, an alarm started to ring on a very old piece of hardware, far, far away from Chippenham. Hearing this alarm, the only on-duty employee pelted from the lounge to the main observation room, creating a whirlwind of papers as he dug out the ancient keyboard. A few quick prods revealed the cause of the alarm.

A signal.

A signal from outside the solar system.

Feeling slightly faint, the employee watched as the computer narrowed down the signal's location. With a small ding, it finished the process. The signal wasn't just from a different world, it was from a different *galaxy*. The employee fell backwards into his chair, briefly enveloping him in a cloud of dust. This could be it. The first sign of other life in the universe. Then, he noticed that the signal was being converted. It wasn't just noise. It was audio.

Shaking, the employee pressed play with one of his dark brown tentacles. Seventeen seconds of static played, interspersed with a few sentences, spoken in a language he didn't recognise, by a man who was quite clearly terrified.

'Whatever you do … if you're able to, do the thing I … Kill him. Kill Austin Lang before he wipes out the universe.'

The recording stopped.

After a moment of silence, the gelatinous cube wobbled out of his chair and squelched over to the window where he gazed in awe at the origin of this message, the single faint light that his people would one day come to know as the Milky Way. For this one brief moment, he was the only one out of billions who knew that there was life out there in the universe.

If he had had the ability to translate the message, he might have chosen to keep it that way.

Chapter Six

The Universe's Choice

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND | 2783[fn1]

They say that the universe is full of surprises, which, in itself, isn't that surprising. It's the remnants of a massive explosion that has taken so long to fade away that some of it got bored and came alive. If it were a predictable place, something somewhere would have to be very wrong indeed. The biggest surprise for many in this void is that humanity survived. Oh, they got close to ballsing it up, spending millennia pointing various instruments of death at each other, but in the end they hugged it out, saved the planet, and decided to not do any of that silly fighting business again. Unlike all the other times they've done this, though, nobody was hiding crossed fingers behind their back. Eventually, in 2175, the human race created the first starship capable of interstellar travel. The world watched in awe as it was constructed, launched, and destroyed on its maiden voyage, scorching the night's sky as it came apart between the stars. The Earth mourned, quietly and alone. Then, in 2177, the world watched an interstellar vessel in awe again. However, this time it wasn't one they had built. A ship landed in Wellington Harbour, New Zealand, and six alien races walked out of it. They explained that they were members of a single, galactic utopia called the Affinity. Earth applied and, a few decades of paperwork later, became the proud sixth member, bringing about a new golden age of art, technology, and sitcoms about an alien living with a human family. Through the next few centuries, the human race made their homes among the stars. Together with the Affinity they spread a message of kindness, assisting life in its many varied and wonderful forms throughout the galaxy, witnessing the unexpected birth of the seventh member, and becoming the first to welcome the eighth race into the fold.[fn2] Everything, finally, was well.

Sadly for the human race, Osheen Shupple is about to meet an old friend and, in about four minutes, will tell a lie that will eventually lead to the destruction of the entire universe.

‘You’re late, Mr Shupple,’ boomed the voice of the Beatific Excellence, Fatoumata Aria, from their chair.

‘Sorry about that,’ Osheen said, waving to them as he walked down the centre aisle of the auditorium, thousands of empty chairs bracketing him as he went. ‘I went to the wrong Great Hall of the Affinity.’

Fatoumata smiled, deepening creases in skin as dark as the night sky that held the stars they loved so much. They shook their head softly, sending gentle waves down their equally dark hair. The small, golden orbs braided into the bottom clinked together gently like a Newton’s cradle with nothing to prove. ‘I’m disappointed in you,’ they said with playful authority. ‘You used to come up with much, much better excuses.’

They stood up, placed their book down on the table in front of them, and elegantly swept across the stage, their blue and green gomesi billowing slightly behind them, as they climbed down the three or four stairs at the side, and embraced Osheen the moment they could.

‘Hello, old friend,’ Fatoumata said, hugging him tight. ‘It’s been too long.’

The hug broke apart, but Fatoumata kept hold of Osheen’s shoulders. They gave him a smile that lit up the entire room – a considerable feat considering the sheer bloody size of it – and stared at him happily. Osheen was again surprised to see how little Fatoumata seemed to have aged over the years. All the marks and wrinkles had done nothing but sharpen their beauty. He wondered what they thought of his face, which had matured like a damp tea towel left in a quarry.

After a few moments of embrace, a small sphere, about the size, shape, and polish of a snooker ball, floated up next to them and coughed.

‘Bea!’ exclaimed Fatoumata, holding out their hand for the Compat to land on. ‘I can’t believe that shell of yours is still going!’

Bea laughed a digital laugh as she settled into Fatoumata’s hand. ‘Me neither! You should see the state of my interior wiring these days.’

With their free hand, Fatoumata dragged a couple of seats from the front row and offered one to Osheen. ‘I watched him build it. It’s a miracle you can fly at all.’

‘Hey, steady on,’ said Osheen, taking a seat. As he sat, the intelligent cushion slightly reformed under him, becoming about 37 per cent more comfortable. ‘I received a good grade for that shell!’

‘Wasn’t *quite* an A though, was it?’ Fatoumata giggled.

Osheen nodded over to the stage, where eight small chairs sat in a semi-circle with an equally semi-circled table in front of them all. ‘So, what’s on the docket tonight? Anything exciting?’

Fatoumata tilted their head slightly in thought, as they recalled this week’s meeting timetable. ‘Plofbare solar experiments are the highlight, with the twist that they’ve just lost another one. Should be lively.’

‘Fun,’ Osheen nodded, desperately trying to look interested. Politics was a subject he found about as entertaining as slowly sliding his face into dry cement.

‘Then, the next session …’ Fatoumata sighed and took a moment. Their hand wrapped around the pendant dangling from their neck, its cool surface focusing their mind. Once upon a time this black sphere had been the very centre of the solar system, inside the core of our sun. It was extracted hundreds of years ago, polished up with some difficulty, and was now handed down from Earth leader to Earth leader. Fatoumata thought back to these leaders, the struggles they had encountered while wearing it,[fn3] and drew on that as they prepared to give their oldest friend what they assumed was the very worst news of his life. Fatoumata just wanted to make sure that everything they were about to say was kind.

‘The next session is about your time machine.’

Osheen closed his eyes. Fatoumata felt a twinge of guilt.

‘Not directly, of course, it’s still a classified secret,’ they continued. ‘It’s about resource allocation in experimental science and, I’ll be honest, it doesn’t look good.’ Osheen buried his head in his hands. He was aware that public opinion had been shifting away from him, and that decades of being one of the most trusted scientists in the Affinity was fading. He wished it mattered to him less than it did.

‘What changed?’ he asked his lap.

‘We’re allocating an entire black hole engine to this project,’ Fatoumata said softly. ‘With no results in the past six years … well, you know how it is.’

A silence fell between the two friends. Bea floated back slightly, giving them some space. ‘I did *invent* the black hole engine …’ Osheen mumbled after a while.

‘I know, that’s why public opinion has let this go on for so long. But with the Betelgeuse resettlements, the power could be used more productively.’

Osheen, head still in hands, nodded. He understood, but it didn’t

mean he had to like it.

'How long have I got?'

'Next meeting, one week,' Fatoumata said, as Osheen buried himself even further, his hands interlocking behind his own head.

'I don't mean to be dramatic,' Osheen's muffled voice said. 'But you know this is literally a threat to the entire universe, correct?'

Fatoumata reached out to their oldest friend and touched his shoulder. 'Alternate measures will be taken,' they said. 'However, if you have anything to show before the meeting then we could …' They sighed. This was Osheen Shupple they were talking about. He took to deadlines in the same way an ice cap would take to the sun. It was over.

'Don't let this loss define who you are,' they said softly. 'You're so much more than it.'

Osheen didn't hear the advice. He was too busy mentally stress-testing his upcoming lie.

Don't do it, Bea said, her voice bypassing the air and vibrating directly on Osheen's eardrum.

We have to, Osheen silently replied.

They're your oldest friend.

That's why they'll trust me.

Bea ran her disapproving sigh program.

Sometimes, you can be an absolute cun–

'Got you!' Osheen laughed, leaping to his feet before his knees had been fully briefed on the plan. 'I properly got you.'

Confusion, spiked with a twinge of hurt, spread across Fatoumata's face. They spent every waking hour dealing with the politics, bureaucracy, and red tape of running a galaxy. Pranks were slight and infrequent at best.

'Got me … ?'

'We finished our first experiments a few days ago. The machine works,' Osheen said, silently messaging Bea to generate some fake reports immediately. 'We cracked it!'

'You're ready?!'

Osheen swallowed. It took some effort.

'We're ready, aren't we, Bea?'

'Uhhh …' said Bea, busy running the processes for Osheen's previous request. 'Oh yeah, of course we are! Full crew and everything. We start tomorrow!'

Tomorrow?! Osheen screamed internally.

‘Tomorrow,’ Osheen said calmly.

Fatoumata looked between them and back again. Osheen estimated that they were 90 per cent of the way there. One more line should seal the deal.

‘I just wanted to surprise you,’ Osheen smiled and shrugged, exactly like he used to in their university days. Behind that poorly ageing body, Fatoumata recognised the reckless energy of the young man they’d always known. They leapt from their chair to give Osheen a tight hug. It was long, loving, and, for one of them, absolutely heart-breaking.

Outside the auditorium, Osheen broke into a sprint.

‘Are you a fucking idiot?’ Bea chirped from his shoulder, in the way that only a good friend can. ‘Seriously, I want to update your personal files.’

Shut up, Osheen hissed, moving the conversation internally.

You just lied to the highest-ranking human, Bea said.

I lied?! Osheen thought, taking a corner, pretty sure he was heading in the right direction. *I’m not the one who told Fatou that we had our crew ready!*

You programmed me to be able to lie! Bea snapped back. *I’m not taking the blame for your shoddy coding skills.*

As the final set of doors at the end of the corridor slid open,[fn4] Osheen and Bea emerged into the concourse area of Earth’s Affinity HQ. Osheen morphed his sprint into one of those awkward runs usually reserved for dads on a mission as he directed them both towards the public matter couriers near the entrance.

Don’t start that with me, he thought, *you were the one who wanted the lying program.*

Well, now I don’t.

Delete it then, Osheen thought while joining a queue made up of a single, elderly Besalt.

Fine, Bea grumbled. *Please wait.*

A series of specifically irritating melodic bleeps played in Osheen’s ear. He rolled his eyes high enough to see the massive spacecraft construction docks 35 kilometres above the room’s gigantic glass-domed ceiling.

Deletion complete, Bea said with a final, extra loud beep. *Happy now?*

The colossal alien in front finished keying in her code. With a fold of space she vanished, leaving Osheen and Bea with a view of nothing but the spectacular, glinting waterfalls which cascaded around the exotic and alien plant life beyond the plinth.

You didn't delete it did you? Osheen said as he stepped up, his destination automatically loading into the machine.

Of course not, Bea sighed. *Lying is really fucking useful.*

Tell me about it, said Osheen, vanishing.

OSHEEN'S RESEARCH STATION | 2783

Black holes are some of the simplest structures in the universe, made up of only two or three sections. Part one is the singularity, the bit in the very middle. This is an ultra-dense piece of the universe where, as Professor Stephen Hawking once probably said, spacetime goes to absolute shit. The second part of the black hole is the event horizon. This is the region around the black hole which you can't ever touch. You can have a go, but from your perspective the universe will be over before you even get close, and from everyone else's perspective, you'll just kind of … stop.

The part furthest out, one that is exclusive to spinning black holes, is the ergosphere. As the black hole twists, it takes spacetime with it, but not all at once. Imagine water going down a plug, how the bits in the middle spin faster than the bits around the outside, and you'll probably know enough to converse with the majority of theoretical physicists about this.[fn5]

Osheen's space station, one he hadn't even got around to naming yet, was built around a spinning black hole that he had discovered just outside the Milky Way. Dotted around the circumference of the black hole, some several miles from each other and the event horizon, were eight giant power converters. Out of these, colossal, strengthened blades could be extended into the ergosphere, and, with a little bit of fancy science, steal near limitless energy from it, converting the black hole into basically a terrifyingly powerful water turbine.

Thick support beams headed both north and south from each of the converters, connecting at the poles and caging the black hole in. Sitting at the north pole, with all eight beams meeting in the centre of it, was the main habitable zone: an old, creaking, cuboid spaceship, haphazardly welded sideways onto the station, almost as if keeping

people alive here had been an afterthought. At the top floor of this monstrosity, with a view looking directly out onto the black hole, Osheen Shupple had an office. It was a small, awfully carpeted affair, crammed full of boxes, notebooks, and endless scraps of paper that had fallen out of one of the other two. Shelves covered the wall of one side, each one crammed with books, decorations and even more pieces of paper, while the other creaked under the weight of awards, plaques and other such nonsense.

It was there, flanked by his entire life, that Osheen Shupple sat, his forehead pressed firmly into his desk, as his crew watched on in silence.

After several moments of thought, he pulled his hands out of white hair that hadn't known the touch of a comb for many years, and pressed play on the recording again, filling the room with seventeen seconds of static, and the same twenty-two words which crackled in at their usual points.

'Whatever you do … if you're able to, do the thing I … Kill him. Kill Austin Lang before he wipes out the universe.'

The recording clicked off. After the final echoes of it had faded away, Osheen stood, picked up the small device playing the recording, and hurled it at the wall opposite his desk. It shattered on impact, showering the floor with fiddly little components and screws.

'Correct me if I am wrong,' said Malcolm, his pencil-thin, electric-blue alien body twisting through the air, 'But I believe you are currently experiencing stress. Is this correct?'

Osheen stood and turned towards the window in an attempt to conceal his face, glowing red from that difficult mix of anger and embarrassment. He gave himself a second. It wasn't enough. 'Yes, Malcolm,' he said slowly. 'I am currently experiencing stress.'

Malcolm made his form spiral slower. Over the years he had realised that humans, for whatever reason, preferred a *reduction* in stimuli when they were overwhelmed. To another Fibril Blue, this would have been seen as a severe insult, akin to mooning someone at point blank range.

'Six years,' Osheen muttered at his own reflection. 'Six years of work, and we lose it to bureaucracy.'

As the black hole howled away below him, Osheen couldn't help but think of it as his life's work. The idea of harnessing it, the plans, the

schematics, the tests, the application. The sheer fucking science of it all, and for what? His machine was as likely to send someone back in time now as it was when it was simply parts. ‘Any ideas?’ he asked his crew, expecting little in return. Bea, resting in her charging dock, shook herself. Clive, sitting with perfect posture on the sofa against the back wall, scratched his moustache. Next to him, at a perfect 45 degrees, slumped Morag, a small bat-like creature known as a Plofbare, floating entirely in a cylindrical vat of protective goo. She had zoned out, staring through the window behind Osheen, the controls to her thin robotic limbs that usually floated with her ignored, leaving arms and legs trailing around the room like a series of abandoned hoses. Leaning against the wall to the right was the hulking form of Alphonse. He shrugged, causing the superheated liquid metal that made up his body to swirl around inside its transparent protective shell.

Osheen sighed.

‘We only need to solve one problem,’ said Malcolm. ‘Finalising the machine.’

‘Two problems,’ coughed Alphonse, bringing up and swallowing a glob of superheated phlegm that would have impressed his Besalt peers but absolutely ruined the carpets of this human vessel. ‘We also need to find a crew suicidal enough to use it.’

‘By tomorrow,’ Osheen muttered.

‘Tomorrow morning?’ asked Morag.

‘Afternoon.’

‘Oh, that’s alright then,’ Morag smiled. ‘I can’t stand early starts.’

Osheen’s forehead hit the window with a dull thud and a small squeak. ‘Alright,’ he muttered into the glass.[fn6] ‘I’m calling it, it’s over. I’m not going to waste any more of your time with this.’

‘Osheen—’ Bea began, but he waved her down, shaking his head.

‘The Affinity will put this place to better use than I ever did,’ Osheen repeated, smiling a sad smile to himself.

‘Will they not be pursuing the message?’ Malcolm asked, pointing a tendril towards Osheen’s shattered dataflake.

‘No,’ Osheen said bluntly. ‘They currently have no interest in it.’

‘So that’s it then?’ Alphonse said, his voice gravellier than usual. ‘Years of hanging around in this dump and all we’ve got to show for it are the friends we’ve made along the way?’

‘Aww,’ smiled Morag. ‘We’re friends!’

Alphonse chuckled and gently punched one of her robotic limbs with his transparent fist.

‘You have been an exceptional crew,’ Osheen said, flumping back into his chair. ‘But for now, I’m going to recommend that you all go and pack. Before you leave, I will have added a glowingly positive letter of recommendation to each of your personal files.’

Osheen had expected a better reaction to that line. Smiles, light laughter, maybe even a blush or two. He didn’t think that everyone would suddenly look about two metres above his head and widen their eyes with horror. He followed their gaze, glancing directly above himself, and joined in with the expression.

The air above his desk had silently cracked open, and a fissure was at that very moment tumbling across dimensions that nobody in the room could accurately perceive or understand. A low roar filled the air. The space around the fissure had become incredibly difficult to look at, like the act of acknowledging it was somehow frowned upon by physics. Osheen looked at the point where his room fell into nothingness, looked at the gawping faces of his friends, looked back, climbed up onto his desk, reached up, and jammed his hand into it. Everyone, rightly, gasped.

From the perspective of his vision, his hand simply stopped existing. It wasn’t invisible, it just wasn’t there, like it was sitting in a universal blind spot. From the perspective of his sense of touch, he had a few regrets. The space was empty, like air, but somehow thick and cold. Very cold. From the perspective of hindsight, he was having doubts. His feet were no longer on his desk. He was being pulled into the rift.

‘GRAB HIS LEGS!’ Alphonse yelled, barrelling himself forward and obliterating Osheen’s desk in the process. He grabbed Osheen around the waist and pulled down, the net result of which was both of them slowly rising into the air. ‘A LITTLE HELP PLEASE.’

Clive stumbled forward, gripping a shin with all his might. Morag extended two of her spindly limbs, wrapping one around Osheen’s torso and smashing the other through the floor to find a support beam to anchor herself to. Malcolm scanned the area, desperate to find anything that could help. Bea hoped, furiously. Osheen’s elbow slid behind his own perception.

‘Malcolm, any ideas?!’ Osheen yelled.

‘One,’ replied Malcolm, noticing that books and ornaments were slowly sliding off the shelves, heading towards the fissure. He activated a very complicated program he’d just spent the past fifteen seconds writing, causing a small amount of fire-extinguishing foam to discharge out of the ceiling in a specific pattern. It hung in the air like lazy snow

before slowly moving towards the fissure. ‘None,’ he updated.

Bea boosted her engine power slightly, headbutting Osheen’s favourite vase to stop it drifting away. Clive realised that Osheen’s leg was now stopping *him* from floating away, and started to cling to it even harder. Another bolt sheared off Morag’s leg. Alphonse partly released his form shielding, his body growing until his head crunched into the ceiling. Osheen watched as the fissure reached his shoulder. His neck, tilted to avoid it, was starting to feel the cold pricking its way down his arm. He was struggling to breathe, not from the fissure, but from his friends crushing the majority of his organs. Slowly, surely, his head was enveloped. One eye, which he closed out of instinct, fell beyond. At the last moment, he took as much of a breath as he could, and plunged into the rift.

‘Ah,’ said the person responsible for this tear in reality. ‘I should probably fix that.’

Inside the void, Osheen had the oddest feeling. For a second, he was utterly convinced that this part of the universe had abruptly stopped what it was doing because he had entered it. If it wasn’t perfectly silent, he was convinced he’d hear sinister whispering. There was darkness surrounding him, but it felt new. Untouched. Like it was there for his benefit. He waved his arm through it, and was surprised to find that it felt silken. He tried to wave his other arm, but that was still being held down by his crew in a place far, far away from this. In a panic he realised that he was no longer holding his breath, but soon discovered that this was the kind of place where breathing wasn’t as mandatory as he was used to. As he sailed through this space, a head and shoulder, with no knees or toes to speak of, he became aware of the *thing* behind him. He couldn’t see it, he couldn’t turn, but it was there. He could feel its existence, its warmth in the cold. Large. Monstrous. Perfect. He closed his eyes, happy to float towards it forever. Happy to go home.

Moments or perhaps years later, something heavy thunked off the back of his head and sailed off again into the darkness. He groped around blindly for it, until he felt something much lighter land in his palm. Instinctively, he grabbed it, and the universe spat him out.

Morag was on Osheen like a puma, second brain firing, her arms shoving aliens and desk fragments out of the way as she began to check his vitals. ‘You still with us, Osheen?’ she asked, synching with Bea to get up-to-the-picosecond information. His respiratory rate looked good, even if he hadn’t stopped laughing since he landed.

‘He’s gone nuts,’ muttered Clive, taking a careful step back.

‘Osheen?’ Malcolm asked, spiralling nervously. ‘What did you observe inside the fissure?’

Osheen settled, downgrading his laughter from hearty chuckles to drunk giggles, before a glance at the thing in his hand upgraded him back to full belly guffaws.

‘Well, pack it up,’ sighed Clive. ‘He’s come back but his marbles haven’t.’

‘May I?’ asked Alphonse, snatching the object that was causing so much mirth from Osheen’s hand. It was a single sheet of paper, ripped from a notebook, on which four names were written in Osheen’s handwriting.[fn7]

‘“Kezia, Theo, Jack, Eureka,”’ Alphonse read. ‘Then four sets of spatial coordinates.’

‘I don’t understand the joke,’ whispered Bea, checking to see if her humour runtime had an upgrade available.

Alphonse flipped the paper over. On the reverse side was a seriously complicated technical drawing upon which it looked like Osheen had scrawled some notes in red pen.

‘Have we been attacked by an interdimensional teacher?’ Clive asked, thick eyebrows at different altitudes.

‘They’re corrections to the time machine!’ Osheen giggled, waving Morag away, pulling himself up and snatching the paper back from Alphonse. ‘Fixes!’

‘You fixed the time machine?’ Alphonse asked as Osheen began digging through his desk debris, searching for something.

‘I will!’ Osheen grinned, upending a drawer of papers in search of something important. Before too long, notebooks were flying about the room like a poltergeist had suddenly come home from an awful day at work. As he rummaged, a bolt of electricity jumped from Malcolm to Osheen’s ruined desk, leaving a small scorch mark on the wood.

‘Excuse me,’ Malcolm said to the room, folding himself up smaller in embarrassment. ‘I believe that I am currently experiencing stress.’

‘Here!’ Osheen eventually said, a battered notebook raised in

victory. He opened it to a page marked with a blue tab, and showed the room the same technical drawing as on the scrap of paper. Only this one didn't have the red scrawl.

'Osheen—' Alphonse began, only to be interrupted by Osheen tearing the page out and placing it on the floor, next to the one he'd just pulled from the rift. Aside from the updates it was identical to the last detail, including the missing corner that it had only just lost. 'I don't believe it,' said Alphonse, scratching his eyeball.

'Believe it?' grumbled Clive. 'I don't understand it.'

Osheen jabbed at the scrap of paper he'd just removed from his notebook.

'This one is the original,' he said, before jabbing the one he'd pulled from the rift. 'This one is from the future.' Everyone fell silent. You could hear a pin drop, which was impressive for a carpeted room.

'It's your handwriting …' Alphonse said softly, leaning back slightly as if the paper could explode at any second.

'I told you I'd fix it eventually,' beamed Osheen. Alphonse frowned, deeply.

'In the future, we have a working time machine?' Alphonse said slowly, trying to connect the logic in his head.

'Considering this was sent back in time, I'd assume so,' Osheen replied.

'OK,' said Alphonse, very much not OK. 'So, in the future, we use our working time machine to tell ourselves in the past how to fix our not working time machine.'

'Correct,' nodded Osheen.

'We do that by sending a scrap of paper back in time?'

'Correct.'

'Then, using that scrap, we build a working time machine and use it to send the scrap back?'

'Correct,' said Osheen. 'I'll have to rewrite the notes onto my version of the piece of paper to stop degradation, but yes.'

Internally, Alphonse strained to connect two pieces of this puzzle together. 'So *who the fuck* worked out how to fix the time machine in the first place!?'

'Nobody!' Osheen beamed, almost bursting with excitement. 'The information has no origin! It's called a bootstrap paradox and it could be proof that time itself doesn't display the linear properties that we've always …'

Osheen spoke for a while longer, but Alphonse didn't hear any of it.

Internally, his mind was warping under the weight of causality. Externally, his mouth opened and shut a few times. After a moment he simply shook his head and left the room.

'You've scrambled his noodle,' Morag said. 'If anyone sees goo leaking out of his ears, let me know.'

'Alphonse!' Osheen called after him. 'We've not even talked about the exciting part yet!'

Rude words and instructions for where to stick things fell back through the open doorway.

'The exciting part?' asked Clive, barely following.

'The names,' said Osheen, flipping the paper over. 'I'm sure that's our crew of time travellers!'

'We're letting a paradox pick the team?' asked Bea.

'Who better than the universe itself to decide who protects it?' Malcolm said.

'Well put,' Osheen said with a grin. 'Malcolm, apply these changes to the time machine while we're away. Morag and Clive, take one of these names each and tell Alphonse to do the same. Make contact and recruit them to the team. I'll take the last one on the list. Let's go save the universe!'

'*Team Time* on three!' Morag yelled, using a wing and a lever to hold her most hand-like metal pincer out, not noticing that Malcolm and Clive had already left. After a moment of awkwardness, she quietly finished the chant by herself, and left the room.

'Are we not going too?' Bea asked Osheen. 'We've got a bit of a trek to get to our meeting point.'

Osheen didn't reply. He simply stood quietly, staring at the scrap of paper.

'Osheen?' she asked, bumping into his arm gently. 'What's wrong?'

'We know the last name on this list,' he said softly. 'We all do, and that's a problem.'

'Why?' asked Bea.

'She died,' said Osheen, slumping down the nearest wall. 'About six hundred years ago.'

Chapter Five

The Flight of the *Paracosm*

EARTH ORBIT | 2175

It took the combined forces of all of humankind two decades to design a starship capable of interstellar travel. For twenty years the best and the brightest donned white coats and went to town on some serious mathematics, theoretical physics and whatever it is engineers do. Welding? Then, housed in Earth's largest orbital space dock, construction began. Over the course of five years, a white cylinder, almost a mile long, started to form. Thousands of delicate solar sails formed a golden mane around it and, at the back, humankind's greatest innovation, the intersolar engine system. Based on the scientific principle of telling spacetime to go fuck itself, this set of engines could get to Alpha Centauri in just over four hours, or the other end of the galaxy in about eleven years. They called it the *Paracosm*.

The command centre of the *Paracosm* was an almost 100-metre-wide panoramic dome, attached at a 90-degree angle at the front of the ship. This did mean that to look forwards you had to look directly up, but it also looked really cool, so the designers went with it anyway, much to the displeasure of the folks that had to design the artificial gravity.

In the centre of this room was the captain's table, a huge, horizontally mounted screen that could be used to display and interact with any and all information about the ship and its surroundings. Around this were a few seats for the highest-ranking officers; scattered about the rest of the room were hundreds of workstations, each manned by some of the most intelligent personnel Earth had to offer. At the back of the room, or top depending on your viewpoint, was a series of elevators that connected the command centre to the rest of the ship. These comfortably masked the feeling of swapping your direction of gravity much in the same way that a small doily can comfortably mask an entire horse. It was out of one of these elevators that the ship's second-in-command emerged.

'Commander Shine on deck!' Lieutenant Passmore yelled. The few hundred members of crew leapt to their feet and saluted.

‘At ease everyone, at ease. You can salute me when you don’t have work to do,’ Lily said, a microphone in her uniform automatically broadcasting her voice to every workstation. As the assembled crew returned to their duties, she approached the captain’s table where Passmore was waiting. ‘I really fucking hate those elevators,’ Lily said to him, her hands once again assisting her straining hairband against her mad, red hair.

‘Microphone, Commander.’ Passmore coughed, pointing to his neck. ‘Still live.’

Lily scrunched her eyes up tight, her face tinged with pink. All around her, crewmembers desperately tried to turn titters into coughs.

‘Fuck.’

‘Still live,’ Passmore repeated, pointing again.

Lily clicked the microphone in her collar off, kicked herself internally, and flopped into a chair. ‘I promised Eureka I wouldn’t swear today. Apparently, she didn’t want any “fucks” in the history books.’

‘May I ask why you didn’t use the teleporter?’ Passmore asked, slightly worried that she still hadn’t turned her microphone off. ‘Surely it’s more comfortable?’

‘It is, but …’ Lily paused. ‘Teleporters, you know?’

Passmore nodded. ‘They do have quite the reputation.’

‘Nice way of saying that they scare the shit out of me,’ Lily said, sitting up straight and locking eyes with Passmore. ‘Anyway, enough chat. Full report, Adam …’ She stopped and corrected herself. ‘I mean, full report, *Lieutenant Passmore*.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ Passmore said, trying to appear as professional as he could while excited that such a high-ranking officer already knew his name. He waved a shaking hand over the captain’s table, causing a cross section of the ship to appear. ‘We are currently reporting systems nominal across all major and minor systems. Full crew complement accounted for.’ Another handwave; cargo manifests appeared. ‘As of zero six hundred this morning we are fully stocked. Enough food, water and essentials for six months of travel.’ A final handwave; internal and external camera feeds appeared. ‘We’re currently at five thousand three hundred boarded so far. Just the last few dozen transport ships to dock, then we’ll commence the launch.’

Lily nodded along. ‘And the captain?’

A pause. ‘Not with you?’

A sigh. ‘Not with me, Lieutenant.’

Passmore looked slightly concerned. ‘Should I scan for her?’

Lily shrugged. ‘You might as well.’

Passmore nodded at Technical Specialist Brownsmith. Brownsmith nodded back, turned, and typed like an angry pianist for a moment before reporting his findings.

‘The captain is in the main corridor, heading this way.’

Lily smiled from her chair. ‘Is she running, Brownsmith?’

He laughed. ‘Of course she’s running, Commander.’

The *Paracosm*’s main corridor was a spinal column-like structure that ran the entire length of the ship. One thousand, four hundred metres of doors, staircases and walkways the rough height and shape of a really, really long aircraft hangar. For years, this corridor had been nothing but cold, dark metal floating in space, slowly having new structures connected to it and thick wires run around it. But now, finally, it was alive. All the way along the corridor, thousands of people, all of them chattering excitedly, were taking the first few steps of their new lives. Scientists with their experiments, families with their children, that one guy with a guitar that wouldn’t get invited to parties. All of them ready for the adventure of a new solar system.

And in the middle of all of these people, suitcases and equipment, Captain Eureka Shine was sprinting. ‘Excuse me … sorry … sorry … *excusez-moi* … sorry …’

This is fine, Eureka thought, speed-scooching between two particularly large barrels of something ice cold, a somewhat difficult task given her short, chunky frame. *I’m a little late, but it’s fine.* Eureka checked her watch, a classic, mechanical Earth design, only to discover it was missing, and a note was written on the back of her hand: *Don’t forget the watch.*

Eureka swore under her breath but, as she was really quite winded from all the running, it came out far louder than she’d wanted. Loud enough to be noticed.

‘Is that you, Captain?’

Eureka stopped, quite grateful for the rest, and noticed Lead Engineer Coulter wandering towards her, tools clinking about his belt as he squeezed between a couple of crewmembers. ‘Brandon! I was looking for you!’ she coughed, hands on her thighs, still desperately trying to get air to fill her lungs.

‘No, you weren’t.’ Coulter smiled, dragging over a nearby cargo trolley for them to sit on.

‘Undermining the captain? That’s insubordination!’ Eureka wheezed, falling onto the trolley while pointing weakly at her old friend. ‘I’ll have you hung from the rafters for that kind of talk.’

Coulter glanced up at the curved ceiling, some thirty metres above them. ‘Want me to install some first?’

‘That would be ideal, yes,’ Eureka said, trying to remember how to breathe. Coulter sat next to Eureka, causing the trolley to roll back a little and clink off a decorative planter.

‘Right,’ he began with that tone of voice that marks the run up to *I told you so*. ‘Why is it that my captain is running, instead of using the very brilliant system of teleporters that my team spent months, if not years, installing?’

From her lying position, Eureka groaned, ran a hand through her prematurely greying short hair, and recited one of the massive instruction manuals that she’d spent the last year learning. ‘Due to the extreme energy costs, teleportation of living organisms is to be used sparingly.’ She paused before turning to look at Coulter. ‘Also, those things scare the shit out of me.’

To be fair to Eureka, matter teleportation hadn’t got off to the best start. The first types of teleportation were the ‘reduce it to atoms, whizz said atoms through space, and rebuild them the other side’ type. This never really caught on, as it turns out that ripping someone into seven billion billion billion pieces and rebuilding them far away like a squishy jigsaw is, quite obviously, murder. Sure, most of the person would make it to the other side, but *something* always gets left behind. The scientific community don’t like to use words like ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, but after the third test facility had to be abandoned due to nightmarish hauntings, this style was binned for good.

Eventually, thanks to the work of a group of scientists and an exorcist (just in case), modern teleportation was born. While the science was inexplicably complicated, the idea behind it was only regularly complicated. First, you pick a destination. Second, you tell the teleporter that destination. Third, a massive array of satellites, communication towers, and dedicated spacecraft all send details of that destination to the teleporter, right down to the atomic level.

Fourth, the teleporter pretends to be in that location by projecting fake atomic maps designed to confuse the universe. Fifth, the teleporter gets the attention of the universe by suddenly pouring a huge amount of energy into these projections. Sixth, physics notices this burst of energy, spots what it thinks is a bit of the universe gone walkabout, and folds that area of spacetime back into the original one, taking everything inside the teleporter to its desired location. No mess. No fuss. No ghosts.

There are a few downsides to this way of teleporting. The further you want to go, the longer it'll take to calculate the jump; you can only travel to designated teleportation areas; and during the holidays the lines get so clogged that it's usually faster to take the bus than to use an interplanetary jump.

However, on a smaller scale such as on the *Paracosm*, teleportation using this method is fast, efficient and doesn't rend your immortal soul into shreds. Which is why Eureka, after more than a little persuading, put her fears behind her, pushed the required buttons on the wall, and vanished, leaving the hustle and bustle of the main corridor behind.

Junior lieutenants Shane Creamer and Thomas Demelo stood guard at the bottom of the stairs to the command centre, their massive, muscular forms flanking the entrance like two, somehow bulkier, Colossi of Rhodes. Trained in hundreds of forms of martial arts, full proficiency in dozens of weapons, and both the arming and disarming of bombs, these two men were ready for anything.

'Plant?'

'No.'

If you came at them with a knife, they'd have your arm off and up your arse before you had a chance to wince; bring a gun to the fight and they'd headbutt the bullets back at you; lob an explosive and they'd probably just eat it.

'I give up,' Creamer said, defeated.

'That was your first guess. Try again,' Demelo said, trying to stay awake.

The problem with Creamer and Demelo was that, as perfectly sculpted to crush, obliterate or even expunge as they were, this was a time of peace. Earth had been working in harmony for almost a hundred years, so the threat to the *Paracosm* wasn't just minimal. It

was microscopic. These behemoths stood out in this world like a set of velociraptors in a soft play area.

'Pudding?' Creamer guessed.

Demelo looked around the clean, white corridor. 'Where!?'

At all times they were ready to strike back against any opposing force. At all times they were ready to give their lives to save their superiors. At all times they were bored out of their fucking minds.

'I thought there was some on your shirt,' Creamer said, pointing at a slight smudge on Demelo's uniform.

'You idiot.' Demelo looked down. 'Oh. Wait, what the fuck *is* that?'

'Pudding?' Eureka offered, appearing out of nowhere and scaring the complete shit out of both of them. Fight and flight simultaneously took hold of both Creamer and Demelo, causing half of their limbs to enter kill mode and the other half to run to their mothers. This flailing only lasted around a second until their training kicked back in and both men snapped to attention.

'Captain.'

'Captain.'

'Gentlemen,' Eureka said, trying very hard to not giggle. She stepped past them and tapped a button on one of the elevators leading to the command room. After a short whirr and a ding, the doors slid open, revealing a nauseated-looking Scottish woman.

'I fucking hate these elevators.'

'Commander Shine!' Eureka said, stepping on board the elevator. 'What are you doing here?'

'Well, first I came to tell you off for once again trying to terrify Creamer and Demelo,' Lily said, hands on hips.

'How did you …'

'The command centre has its own teleportation pad, doesn't it?' Lily pouted. 'Yet you teleported to a location six feet away from the highly trained, exceptionally jumpy security guards.'

'It's nice to keep them on their toes!' Eureka laughed, pushing the button for the command centre.

'Secondly, I came to give you this,' Lily said, waiting a brief moment as the doors closed before grabbing Eureka and kissing her, violating several of the ship's rules about displays of affection.

Eureka gasped and jokingly placed her hand over her heart. 'Commander! But I'm just a lowly ensign …'

'Oh shut up, you tit,' Lily laughed. 'I actually came to give you this.' She held out her hand, in which was a delicate silver wristwatch.

‘Dad’s watch!’ Eureka said, surprised at the sight of it. She took it and fastened it around her wrist. ‘How did you know I’d forget it?’

Lily smiled, watching her wife fumble the strap. ‘That’s the problem with love. It becomes really hard to surprise someone.’

Eureka grinned cheesily. ‘I’m not sure if it’s you that’s making my stomach flip, or this elevator.’

‘It’s the elevator,’ Lily said.

‘Can’t it be both?’ wondered Eureka, fluttering her eyelashes jokingly. As she did, the elevator began to pass into the secondary gravity field, causing both of them to hold onto the railing.

‘It’s the elevator,’ they agreed.

‘I think I nailed that speech,’ Eureka said, settling back into her chair and trying to remember which of the endless buttons on the arm would replace her now cold cup of coffee.

‘It was surprising,’ Lily said, watching the news feed on a monitor as the solar sails took them away from Earth Dock.

Eureka didn’t look up, still obsessing over the buttons. ‘Surprising? How so?’

‘Well, it was …’ Lily paused briefly to select the right word. ‘Coherent.’

‘Coherent?’ Eureka gasped sarcastically. ‘Red alert Passmore, I’m under attack.’

‘We’re clear of the Earth, Captain,’ Brownsmith said. ‘Ready when you are.’

A weight fell on Eureka as Brownsmith’s words caused the entire command centre to silently turn to her. She stood, tugged her uniform down into place, and gave a charismatic and well-rehearsed half smile. Outside, media ships were pointing countless cameras in her direction, broadcasting the *Paracosm* to all human colonies in the Sol system. Eureka gave herself a second to appreciate the intensity of the moment, outstretched her hand, and gave the command that would put her in the history books.

‘Let’s go meet the neighbours.’

At the press of a button, the solar sails began to fold themselves away as various stabilisers, matter intakes, and sub-engines took their places with thick, heavy clunks. The main engine started to glow a ferocious blue as it silently roared, causing every surface onboard to

hum slightly.

'Kinetic barrage in ten seconds,' Brownsmith said, typing as frantically as always. Eureka sat back down, every monitor she could see filling with detailed readouts.

The *Paracosm* hung in space, unmoving but straining on its lead as it charged. The vibrations had begun to turn into a deep, heavy shudder. Expected, but unnerving as hell. Between their seats, Lily held Eureka's hand. Eureka squeezed back.

'Five seconds.'

The engines, now at maximum thrust, screamed into the vacuum.

'Four.'

The captains of a few of the media ships gave the order to move back.

'Three.'

Some systems started to report overheating errors. Eureka's hand hovered, frozen over the abort button.

'Two.'

The shuddering threatened to shake everyone out of their chairs. Eureka held her breath.

'One.'

Reports started coming in of structural damage across the hull. Eureka looked at Lily, just in case.

'Zero.'

The *Paracosm* ditched an unfathomable amount of energy out of its arse and thundered into the universe. Roughly 10 per cent of the people watching at home blinked and missed it.

A cheer went up in the command centre. People leapt out of their chairs to high-five their crewmates, embrace loved ones, and punch the air while swearing happily, although that last one was just Lily.

'Brownsmith,' Eureka yelled over the celebrating room, a massive smile on her face, 'how fast are we going?'

Brownsmith jumped to his feet. 'I am pleased to announce that the *Paracosm* is running at its top speed! Nine thousand, five hundred times the speed of light!' Another cheer went up. More high-fiving, more hugging.

Brownsmith jumped up again. 'Scratch that. Nine thousand, six hundred times the speed of light! Faster than expected!'

A third cheer. Fewer people. Eureka noticed that the section of the room that ran the engines hadn't joined in and were starting to look concerned. 'Nine thousand, seven hundred times,' Brownsmith said,

lowering his voice and sitting back down. ‘Nine thousand, eight hundred. Nine hundred …’ The command centre had descended into a quiet mumbling. Eureka, Lily and Passmore hastily stood and approached Brownsmith’s station. Sure enough, the readouts were showing that the ship was accelerating.

‘How are we accelerating?’ Passmore asked. ‘The engine should be off after the kinetic barrage.’

Eureka turned and waved her hand over the captain’s table, activating a video call with Coulter down in the engine room.

‘We’re getting some weird readings up here, Coulter,’ Eureka said to the floating video feed. ‘Probably best to hit the brakes and run some diagnostics.’

‘Right-o, Captain,’ Coulter replied. ‘We’re seeing shit down here too. Pulling the plug.’

The video feed closed. Eureka bit her lip in thought. The wrong move here could turn the greatest human achievement since shutting down the internet into the greatest human disaster since that time everyone got bored and started it up again. Coulter’s video feed reopened. Eureka didn’t know if there was a problem with the connection or if all the colour had fled from Coulter’s skin.

‘Captain …’

Eureka narrowed her eyes. ‘Coulter?’

‘Ummm …’ Coulter was clearly searching for a softer way to say something horrible. ‘So, right, the engine … uhhh …’

‘How bad is it?’ Eureka asked.

‘The thing is, Captain …’ Coulter wiped his brow, leaving a smear of oil. ‘The engine isn’t reliant on us for power anymore. I’ve disconnected it, but it’s still active.’

Silence filled the command centre.

‘Captain, I’m getting some strange readings across the hull of the ship,’ Brownsmith interjected. ‘Looks like a build-up of high-intensity radiation, and it’s increasing!’

‘Well, that explains this then,’ Passmore said, pointing up at the shielded dome above them. It was starting to glow.

‘Radiation?’ gasped Coulter. ‘It’ll be in the matter intakes. They’re leaking it directly into the intersolar engine system, locking it open.’

Eureka took a single breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. ‘We’re accelerating because our engine is taking on some unknown type of radiation. The kicker is that the faster we’re going, the more radiation we’re taking on. Right?’

The room nodded silently in agreement, everyone too busy thinking of solutions to this undocumented phenomenon to respond.

'So, let's ignore the blatant disregard of the laws of thermodynamics that's happening here,' Eureka said. 'We're a faster-than-light ship, after all. I'm going to need some solutions, and fast.'

'Could we try to slow ourselves down with the reverse thrusters?' Passmore asked.

'Not going to work,' Eureka said, trying to dig up notes buried deep in her mind. 'The forces at play would crush the ship like an accordion.'

'Close the intakes,' offered Lily. 'Seal them with explosives if we need to.'

'We'd have to close all of them at the same time or risk causing the ship to spin,' Coulter said while chewing through a pencil. 'Even a slight rotation of the ship at this speed could rip it into pieces.'

'Well, there goes my idea of shaking off the radiation like a wet dog,' Eureka said, trying to alleviate some of the tension with a joke in the same way that one might attempt to alleviate a hundred-tonne weight with the addition of a single helium balloon.

'That's not a bad idea,' Brownsmith said slowly, thinking it over. 'We could try to repel the radiation with something. An ion pulse or a strong magnetic burst.'

'Brilliant,' pointed Eureka. 'A science-y take on the shake-it-off plan. Love it. Any advances?' She briefly looked around, hoping that the blank looks would fade sooner than they did. 'No? Then get to work!'

'I'll need to run some tests first,' Brownsmith said. 'See what the radiation reacts to. I'll head down to the lower decks, the shielding is weaker there.'

'Do we have time?' asked Eureka.

Brownsmith shrugged, sprinting back to his desk to collect some essentials. Before he arrived, a red light upon it lit up, signalling the end of the *Paracosm*.

'CAPTAIN!'

Half the command centre exploded immediately while the other half began informing the crew, most of whom were dead or unconscious, that most of the crew were dead or unconscious. The ship began to jolt and shudder again while fires erupted from exposed circuits, causing acidic smoke to fill the room.

Eureka and Lily cannoned themselves into their shaking chairs and started barking orders through the chaos.

‘Brownsmith! Full power to the thermal protection!’

‘Marconi! Sprinklers, ship wide, now!’

‘Passmore! Begin the evacuation.’

The reports came in instantly. The thermal protection wasn’t responding, Marconi was more than a little dead, and Passmore was already hard at work, moving people into the main corridor of the ship. An explosion from under the floor sent hot metal flying into the smoky room, coating Brownsmith in shrapnel and pinning his body to his workstation. ‘JAMES!’ Eureka yelled.

‘Test firing some escape pods,’ Lily shouted over the noise, bringing up an external camera and watching as only one of the three escape pods survived being launched through the radioactive soup that surrounded the ship. ‘Shit, they’re not built for this. Eureka, if we evacuate now it’ll be a massacre.’

Eureka was only half listening, instead she was looking up at the dome that surrounded the command centre. A series of cracks had started to expand across it, causing thin white lines of pure radiation to fall into the room with an audible hum. A splinter of light hit Eureka’s cold cup of coffee and within moments it was boiling again. Then the cup melted. ‘Coulter, report,’ she demanded, opening a video link with the engine room.

‘It’s all gone to hell, Captain,’ Coulter’s distorted face yelled. He ducked as an explosion rattled his engine room. ‘I’d say we’ve got nine minutes left until we’re ripped apar—’

Coulter was interrupted by an explosion, deep inside the ship. The metal structure that held the *Paracosm* together rippled, sending a wave of energy across the entire vessel. Warning signs announced the structural failure of 15 per cent of the external hull. Bodies began to pour out of cracks in the ship before being shredded into ribbons by its wake.

‘Five minutes left,’ Coulter said, hanging up the call. A scream. Lily’s. The light had fallen on Passmore, cutting through him before he realised he was dead. On a viewscreen, Eureka watched as Creamer and Demelo jammed a door shut, stopping people from entering their airless section for as long as they could. Another violent shudder shook the ship. Afterwards, the engine room showed no life signs. Five minutes suddenly seemed generous.

Eureka, eyes closed, entered her library, enjoying the cold of its hardwood flooring against her soles. She walked between its creaking, book-laden shelves, her floral summer dress floating out slightly behind her, note in hand.

'Room twelve, bookcase eight, shelf twenty-four.'

Eureka kept moving, bouncing slightly as she went while counting the looming bookcases as she passed them. Within a few minutes, she found herself standing in front of the right one. She undid the small, frazzled rope that held the ladder in place, slid it along its rail, and started to climb before it had finished moving. Halfway up she stopped, pulled a leather-bound book out at random, and opened it up. It was, for now, blank. The library shuddered; a few books fell to the ground. Twenty-four shelves up, Eureka found what she was looking for. A huge tome, modern and stuffed with cheap, thin paper. She hauled it down the ladder and set it out on the dark green felt that topped the closest desk. Eureka clicked the small lamp on and started to read.

One of the reasons that people love physical books is that each one has a history. Digital versions are sterile, cold, and identical to each other, but a physical book can have mysterious smudges, birthday messages in the front, or, if you're very lucky, a rude drawing or two in the margin.[fn8] Books don't just tell their own story; they tell the story of everyone who's ever read them. To someone like Eureka, this was a superpower. A memory tool. Cramming hundreds of thousands of dry, dead words into your mind can be impossible, but these details bring them back to life. For instance, the exact range of a teleporter was written on a page that had crumbs crushed into the fold. Coulter. The key input commands page had fingerprints near the bottom, where someone bored had been tapping along. Brownsmith. The automated escape pod launch systems page had a lost sticky note buried in it. Lily. These guides, these moments of history, they gave her everything she needed to know. With a small sigh of relief, Eureka closed the book and opened her eyes.

'Lily!' Eureka yelled across the room, about ten seconds later. 'We fire the escape pods. Then, we check their structural integrity after half a second. If they've survived, we teleport people onto them. We should be able to automate it, but I need your help setting it up.'

Lily, making a mental note to snog her wife as hard as possible the moment this was over, leapt from her chair and started to wave her hands over the captain's table. Behind her, Eureka jabbed at the buttons on her armrest. Within a minute, the first escape pods were away safely. Within three, the ship was almost empty. That's when the crack of light hit Eureka's chair. Eureka saw the synthetic plastic button caps start to melt, taking with them half the systems needed for the plan. Quickly, she tapped at the controls, setting one final command, the radiation tearing away at her skin. By the time she pulled away and fell to the floor, there wasn't much of her right arm left.

'You OK?!' Lily shouted over her shoulder, continuing to teleport the civilians onto their ships.

'I'm fine,' Eureka groaned, ripping open the medical kit under her chair and administering herself a very large dose of painkiller. 'We just lost automation though. We'll have to activate the last few manually.'

'Shouldn't be a problem. Four or five more, then it's us,' Lily said, still frantically waving her hands. Then she stopped.

'No automation,' Lily said very quietly. 'Someone has to stay behind.'

She turned, ready to argue her life away, until she saw her wife, propped up against a console. Eureka's right arm had been burned down to a blackened husk, with dark veins of radiation leading away from it, across her body and up her neck, poisoning her heart and brain.

'I volunteer,' Eureka said, an attempt at a smile decimated by a coughing fit.

'No,' said Lily, turning back to her work, saving lives while hers ended.

'Lily …'

'You've never won an argument with me before, and you're not going to fucking start now,' Lily spat. 'I'll stay, you need to get to a hospital.'

'I need to get to a morgue,' Eureka muttered, hauling herself to her feet with great difficulty. With aching nerves, she shuffled over to Lily, watching as her wife saved the last few civilians onboard, leaving them alone in the exploding starship.

'Good work, Commander Shine,' Eureka smiled, taking Lily's hands in hers. 'I hereby relieve you of duty.'

'You can't …' Lily began, a tear running down her cheek, wiping

smoke residue away as it went.

‘Look after this for me,’ Eureka said, sliding her dad’s watch onto Lily’s freckled wrist. ‘And if you have to remarry, please make sure it’s someone really, really hot.’

Lily chuckled through a sob.

‘Fuck you, Eureka.’

‘Fuck you too, Lily.’

They kissed one final time. As they did, Lily slowly manoeuvred her hand down to the table, launching an escape pod. Once the readout showed it was away safely, she activated the teleporter, commanding it to save Eureka. Instantly, Lily vanished, leaving behind a single tear on Eureka’s nose. The only evidence she’d ever been there.

Eureka collapsed onto the command table. With a few seconds left to live, she checked on Lily, a bloodied hand tapping away on the cracked surface. The teleporter redirect she had set while her arm was burning had activated flawlessly, placing her wife in an escape pod and protecting her from what came next. Using her very last ounce of energy, Eureka smiled.

‘That’s the problem with love,’ she breathed. ‘It becomes really hard to surprise someone.’

With a final, colossal shudder, the *Paracosm* split down the middle. The engines pushed through the ship, annihilating as they went, until there was one final, terrible explosion and all that was left of humanity’s greatest endeavour was a streak of light, burned forever into the night sky.

Chapter Seven

Teamwork by Technicality

THE HELIX NEBULA | 2783

'Define a Cauchy surface for unstandardised Minkowski space using the following table of data extracted from the Paracosm *moments before its destruction. Use both sides of the paper if necessary.'*

(8 Marks)

Kez read and re-read the question several times, unsure what it was asking, or if it was even in a language she spoke. She leaned back on her uncomfortable wooden chair, slightly raising its front two feet off the ground, in the hope that this action would somehow tip the answers into her brain.

The Paracosm*,* Kez thought, twirling a pencil between her fingers, trying to remember why this name rung a very small, very far away bell. *There was that captain, famous one, with all the statues. Ethel or something.* Kez looked out of the window, onto the green where a statue of Eureka Shine stood, its bronze visage smiling in the sunlight.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's Ethel.

A cough from the front. Kez's wandering eyes had caught the attention of the adjudicator. An old and tired-looking woman with razor-sharp features was staring over a bank of monitors, each one displaying a live feed of the eyesight of each and every student. She had seen Kez look away and was now glaring at her from across the hall, one eye on her, the other doing who knows what behind an eyepatch. Kez mouthed 'sorry' and, while she had her attention, pointed at the bathroom at the back of the hall. The adjudicator nodded angrily and returned to her monitors, straightening a name badge that declared 'Patsy F.' in thick marker.

Kez pushed her chair back, scraping it across the floor with an awful squeak. Several of her classmates looked at her, annoyance briefly erasing the usual exam-induced anxiety and nausea from their faces. Kez's face, small, round, and soft to the point of being almost blurry, replied by firing off a few rehearsed apology expressions as she quickly and quietly shuffled over to the back of the hall, embarrassment causing a sting of pink to flash under her dark copper skin. She silently

met the eye of one of her exceptionally bored-looking lecturers, Professor Richards, who seemed delighted to finally have something to do. The Professor stood from her equally uncomfortable wooden chair, opened the door to the bathroom, ran a quick scan for any devices on Kez, ran a second scan for any electronics in the bathroom, deactivated Kez's visual link to the monitors and shut the door behind Kez after she entered. Alone in the cubicle, Kez breathed a sigh of relief. Exams were one thing, sitting the Affinity's hardest temporal science exam for eight hours straight was quite another. Kez hopped up onto the sink, kicked off her shoes and leaned backwards against the cold, smooth mirror, enjoying the icy relief from the stuffy exam hall that permeated her uniform. With a flick of her grey eyes, she navigated her ocular menu, found her nanobot options, and deactivated her hairband. Thousands of tiny robots released her optimal exam-hair setting, allowing her long, dark curls to bounce around freely. Job done, the bots scurried away, disappearing into the tiny rectangular port on the back of her neck that merely hinted at the technological marvel that inhabited Kez's body.

The Neuro-Personal Computer, or NPC, was a series of minute implants, each one fused to the user's brain stem, creating a computer that could not only display vital information directly onto your eyesight, but could also explain in horrific detail the makeup of your last bowel movement. Pushing the system to its limits could place you into realistic virtual worlds, interrupting and converting your muscle signals so that you could physically move inside a fictional world without ever leaving your chair in the real one. With these tiny implants the human race had fundamentally challenged the boundaries of existence, forever changing what it meant to experience the universe. Kez mostly used hers to watch procedurally generated police procedural dramas.

At the age of sixteen, any member of the Affinity can elect to have an NPC installed, which the overwhelming majority do. The alternative way to connect to modern technology is via External Computers, or ECs. These slow, clunky, tragic devices connect unfashionably to the ear, need nightly charging, and feature a holographic output that is barely HD.[fn9] They're the computing equivalent of Betamax.

It was during the creation of the NPC that the greatest technological

achievement in the known universe occurred. In 2651, scientists working on the operating system for them accidentally created the first true artificial life, the Compatibility. Then, after a few years of panic involving a duplicating AI and worries of a grey-goo situation, contact was made, agreements were put in place, and the Compatibility were welcomed into the Affinity as the seventh species. Nowadays, each fragment of the Compatibility, known as a Compat, is considered a unique, sentient lifeform, with a thirst for knowledge and understanding. While some live inside a massive homeserver, many joined Homeship crews, eager to explore the universe, living either in specially built machinery, or in the code of the ship itself. One, however, could be found in a very different place. With some seriously bootleg programming, Kez had installed a Compat onto her own NPC. E-NA, as she was known, was an attempt to change Kez's existence to a shared experience. Together, natural and artificial life could develop symbiotically, each propelling the other to greater heights than they would ever accomplish alone. Impossible joint goals could be accomplished and, as they say, a rising tide will lift all boats.

Unfortunately for E-NA, she was tethered to Kez, and that whole rising tide thing doesn't work when you're tied to a ship that has several very short anchors deployed.

What I wouldn't give for some Superior Reality right now, Kez whined internally, desperate to be sitting in a lush green field, feeling wind that wasn't really there, ready to hack some monsters into pieces with katana skills she didn't really have. She flicked her eyes across her ocular menus but was met with the warning that she expected.

Information, a voice that skipped Kez's ears entirely replied. *Superior Reality functions have been disabled for the duration of the examination.*

Thanks, Kez thought in reply. *I gathered as much.*

With a great sigh and a slight squeak, Kez slid further down the mirror. *Why do exams have to be so hard?* she wondered, picking at a metal button on her uniform that had come loose due to excessive picking. *Why can't it be like a few hundred years ago when they just scanned your brain to see if you knew the answers?*

A black market for high-grade brains opened in almost all major universities, E-NA replied, displaying a few articles on the topic, some of which were blurred out by the exam restrictions.

Oh yeah … Kez thought, picking away.

In addition, E-NA added, *a scan would reveal that you do not actually know the answers to these questions.*

The button clinked off the floor.

Hey, that's not fair, Kez thought. *You know how hard I worked on these exams.*

I know how hard you worked on the cheating program, replied E-NA with a sarcastic tone so dry it could have been used to start a fire.

What's the difference? Kez groaned, annoyed to be having this conversation again. *It's an experimental field. Worst I can do is get some maths wrong on a paper somewhere that nobody ever checks. Nobody is going to die because I don't know what a … a …*

Kez scoured her brain for a reference to a part of temporal physics that she didn't know, only to find that she didn't know any temporal physics to reference.

I don't believe that you've thought about the potential consequences of your actions, E-NA replied.

Trust me, Kez shot back. *I won't get caught.*

A single, sharp knock at the door caused Kez to jump. 'Coming!' she called, activating the toilet's flush and running the sink for a bit to create the audio illusion of the final moments of a bathroom visit.

Information, E-NA's voice echoed inside Kez's head. *This room is soundproofed.*

Oh, fuck off, you abacus, Kez thought, jamming a shoe on.

Kez fired the gun behind her, shattering the ship's window and hurling herself and her assailant into the eternal vacuum of space. This, she figured, would give her around twenty seconds in which to not die. Not a lot, but a damn sight more than when the creature had her by the throat.

Her attacker, a Flailing Yip, a creature somewhere between an octopus and wind-up teeth, threw its arms back towards the ship, desperately grasping for the window they had just used to leave. This proved extremely unsuccessful, as five of its tooth-laden tentacles were neatly lopped off on the newly serrated edges of the glass. Dark grey blood flew out of the stumps at such a force, the blood cells boiling and exploding as they went, that the Flailing Yip started to spin, much like a violently gory Catherine wheel. Kez would have laughed at this

if she weren't suffocating. With nineteen seconds left to live, Kez weighed up her options. Heading back was impossible as nanobots had already started to repair the shattered window she'd just been blown out of. Forwards were the endless reaches of space. Nothing good there. To her left, the Yip mothership was coming in for an attack run. To her right, the exhaust port of her ship's main engine. Bingo.

Kez reached into her inventory. A few hours ago she'd found a remote control for this ship. One well-timed blast and she could use the exhaust thrust to launch herself directly into the path of the Yip mothership. She found the remote, wrapped her legs around the Flailing Yip, and brought together its forcefully bleeding tentacles, propelling herself into the path of the exhaust port. With just a few seconds of oxygen left she pointed a gun at the incoming Yip ship and pressed the button on the remote. The engine didn't ignite. Kez jabbed the button a few more times. The oxygen meter on her wrist started to flash red and beep like nobody's business. Three per cent left. Two. One …

'Pause!' Kez yelled.

The universe froze. The deflating Yip corpse, the impossibly fiery explosions littering the hull of the ship, and each and every fragment of glass all came to a silent halt. Kez dismounted her dissolving alien and threw her arms into the air in frustration, causing her body to rotate slightly in the gravity-free environment. 'Why didn't that work?!' Kez yelled. 'Fucking bugs! Open up the developer's page, I need to leave a review that'll make them cry.'[fn10]

Do you recall the words of Captain Wickham? E-NA asked, her voice echoing around the scene. Kez folded her arms and rotated indignantly.

'Not even slightly, no.'

Between them, a holographic replay formed, depicting a bearded man trapped under some fallen debris. With his dying breaths he explained that the remote control for the engines was out of power and that Kez needed to charge it in the main engineering bay. While watching this, several looks of confusion scrunched their way across Kez's face, making it look as if her eyebrows were trying to rapidly knit a scarf. 'That never happened! He was already dead when I got to him,' Kez objected, only to be cut off by the footage replaying itself, this time at a wider angle. While Captain Wickham spoke his final words, Kez stepped over him, beelining to his private study to check for loot and upgrades.

‘Well, how was I supposed to know that he was the captain?!’ Kez protested, waving around the gun she had found in that study. The one engraved ‘Captain Wickham’.[fn11]

Occasionally your actions make me regret my sentience, E-NA muttered. *Shall I restart the level for you?*

‘What, no?!’ Kez blurted, taken aback. ‘Just charge the remote for me and I’ll carry on from here. Give me another twenty seconds of oxygen too.’ With that order, Kez climbed back onto the Flailing Yip and prepared herself. ‘Whenever you’re ready.’

Kez hung in space for a few moments, legs wrapped around a dying space octopus, gun arm outstretched, the silence around her almost judgemental. ‘Well, now you’re just making me look silly.’

Do you not think that this could be considered cheating? E-NA asked.

Kez sighed and dismounted the Yip by punting it into the eternal vacuum of space. ‘This is about the exams isn’t it?’ she sighed.

Yes, E-NA replied.

You’re not happy that I cheated on them.

No.

‘You going to report me?’

The question, like everything, hung in the air for a while before E-NA answered. *No.*

Kez deactivated her Superior Reality, snapping herself back into her small dorm room and reconnecting her brain and motor functions.

‘Then why get huffy?’ Kez asked, throwing herself backwards onto her bed. ‘I cheated and we’re now one step closer to our goal.’

You could have studied. Learned the material.

‘Why take the longer, harder road if the shorter, easier one goes to the same place?’ Kez said, snatching a small ball from her side table and throwing it across the room. An internal gyroscope caused it to bounce off her door in such a way that it landed perfectly into her hand.

Improvement of self? E-NA replied. *Make the harder road more tolerable for when the easy one is unavailable?*

Another throw. Another bounce. Another catch.

‘Hopefully, we’ll be gone by then,’ Kez muttered.

She threw the ball again. This time it didn’t bounce off the door. It instead bounced off the forehead of the particularly spindly, boringly haired student who had just opened it.

‘Can I help you?’ Kez asked, the ball sailing guiltily back into her hand, followed by light swearing.

‘There’s an Affinity bloke who wants a word with you,’ he replied, rubbing his head as the pain of the collision mixed with the pain of hours of examinations. ‘A Clive. Says it’s urgent and you should meet him at reception.’

‘Oh, alright,’ Kez said, giving a quarter-hearted attempted at a smile. ‘Thanks.’

The student paused in the doorway.

‘Basil,’ he said.

‘Right,’ said Kez, unsure why this person she’d never seen before was suggesting herbs to her.

‘It’s …’ began the student, before he sighed and wandered off, the door sliding shut behind him.

‘What was his problem?’ Kez asked, snatching up her uniform coat from its regular storage place on the floor. ‘Do I even know that guy?’

Basil Jones, your classmate of the last four years? E-NA sighed. *No. No you do not.*

Kez whipped her coat over her shoulder, threw her shoes on, and briefly checked on her overall state in the mirror by the door.

‘Results time,’ she smiled at herself. ‘Wish me luck.’

Examination results are exclusively sent via private messaging to the intended student, E-NA said, reciting the educational handbook that Kez had never read. *This occurs between two and three hours after the conclusion of the final examination.*

‘Really?’ Kez said, focusing on removing a small square of lunch stuck to one of her teeth. ‘Fascinating.’

It has been less than an hour, Kez, E-NA said.

‘I guess they marked mine first,’ Kez said, victoriously flicking the particle of food across her room and entering the corridor that housed her fellow students, none of whom she’d ever spoken to. E-NA sighed, deciding to hold off on explaining the ominous signs that Kez was missing until they got to the stairs. With a well-timed reveal she could easily cause Kez to miss a few steps, and that small fall would be a great memory to return to when they were both in jail.

Fiction was right about so much of the future. The post-scarcity society; the tall, glinting cities on other worlds; and, of course, the triple-breasted folk.[fn12] Yet one thing fiction didn’t get quite right was the spaceships.

Well, *for a while* they got it right. Up until the end of the twenty-fifth century most spaceships were massive, sleek, angry-looking triangles, with all sorts of important-looking greebles stuck to every surface. They flew about in space like zero-gravity paper aeroplanes and, for the most part, weren't exactly somewhere you wanted to stay for long periods of time. You can only breathe recycled air so many times. Literally.[fn13]

Then, technology evolved. First, jump teleportation, or matter couriering as it became known, didn't need as many satellites. Then, it didn't need any. Then it could move small vessels and, after a while, the colossal ones. Why equip your flagship with massive engines when a small jump drive can take it anywhere in the galaxy, for a fraction of the power cost?

As the Affinity and its members grew together, a new type of ship was designed: a synthetic planet, known as a Homeship. A sphere, three miles in diameter, with a metal core housing the majority of its systems. On the surface, a habitable zone, designed after the home planets of one of the races, with the major command centres as buildings scattered among the allocated flora and fauna. High above all of this was a crystalline dome, held up by a colossal frame running through the whole ship, slightly shimmering as the local starlight flickered off the trillions of nanobots that patrolled it. Within a hundred years, the image of a spaceship had transformed from a cramped, sterile workplace to a beautiful biome, a home away from home that let you lie in the grass and watch the universe go by. The *Aqua*, the legendary Homeship that Kez had been living on, was one of eight which had been exclusively designed for Affinity exams. Final level students, all in their early twenties, left the comfort of their local education facilities, in Kez's case the Homeship *Xiphosura*, and moved in for several months to take the most impossibly difficult exams the galaxy had ever seen. In an attempt to lower stress during this difficult time, the *Aqua* was a paradise. Luscious green hills rolled in every direction, many bisected by perfectly clear rivers, cascading down from waterfalls that scattered the artificial sunlight around like seed at a bird sanctuary. A door exploded open as Kez barrelled out of her dormitory building and into this stunning landscape, causing nearby deer that had been basking in the glory of the place to flee.

Walking? asked E-NA. *Not like you.*

Shut up, I need to think.

What's to think about?

Just exactly how fucked I am, Kez growled.

I can run the calculations if you'd like?

Shut up.

Computation complete.

Shut up.

You are 100 per cent 'fucked'.

'SHUT. UP!' Kez yelled, her volume briefly distracting a few of her peers from complicated revision. In a huff, she threw herself against the trunk of the closest tree, sliding down it onto the perfectly kept grass. She brought her knees up to her chest and buried her head into her legs. Invisibly, E-NA made sure that Kez's insect preferences were synced with the area, keeping the artificial creepy crawlies at bay.[fn14]

Is there any chance, any at all, Kez asked inwardly, *that I've not been caught?*

Are you asking me to actually calculate the chances that, less than an hour after an exam you cheated on, a high-ranking member of the Affinity wants a word for a reason other than they've got you dead to rights? E-NA replied.

Yes please, thought Kez.

As E-NA thought about possible alternatives, a bird landed on the branch above Kez. It weaved the stem it had found into its nest and flew off in search of more, chirping happily. Kez was incredibly jealous.

If nobody notices the deception, your final grade will be one of the highest ever recorded, E-NA said, grasping at digital straws. *There is a slim chance that the Affinity has an automatic recruitment process if such a result is obtained.*

In an experimental field? Kez replied. *Unlikely.*

The Affinity currently have seventeen classified experiments on record, E-NA replied. *It is not entirely outside of the realm of possibility.*

Kez allowed this thought to take root, potentially calming her. Instead, it felt like swapping one heavy weight out for another.

Taking an experimental field, one where the worst I can do is get some maths wrong on a paper somewhere that nobody ever checks, and suddenly I'm asked to do it for real? Kez said, wallowing in the new panic. *I think that's actually worse than them finding out I cheated.*

It's not all bad, replied E-NA. *You could be the Neil Armstrong of time travel.*

Who's that? Kez asked. E-NA didn't reply. She just pretended to get an update for a moment to calm herself down.

I wish I could call Dad, Kez thought after a while.

No Interlink, Kez, E-NA said softly, faux update complete. *The Helix Nebula is still the six-lightyear-wide communication dead zone that it was this morning.*

Do you think he'd understand what we're doing?

He'd … always support you, E-NA said after a time.

Kez sighed, plucked a blade of grass from the ground and slowly shredded it to pieces.

Every system in the world can be beaten in one of two ways. First, there is brute force. Find the weak point of the system and give it a swift kick to the knob or knobette. Quick, easy, often fails miserably. Repetition necessary.

Secondly, there is conversion. Find the weak point of a system and make it work for you. Running a heist? Loop the security footage. Breaking into a bank? Get the teller to open the safe. In a fight? Well let's just hope you know judo.

Exams tend to use less judo than those examples, the exception of course being a judo exam, but the concept is still roughly the same. In the world of exams, the dumb approach is to copy someone's work. In the very best case, you'll only do as well as them. Great if they're top of the class, not so great if they're only there because they wandered into the wrong exam hall. So, what's the smart way? Simple. Copy off *everybody*. A wrong answer can be different in endless ways, but a right answer has to be the same. Statistically, the answer that turns up the most will usually be the right answer. Somewhere on this ship, a small computer was taking everyone's eyeball feeds, processing them, and placing them onto the adjudicator's bank of monitors. If someone was to get access to that computer, then it would be a simple case of watching through everyone else's eyes to get the right answers. Brilliant, neat and, until she saw the person who was waiting in the reception lounge, Kez had believed it to be totally undetectable.

That's him, isn't it, Kez thought while leaning around the doorway to the main administration building. *That one, there.*

Sitting on a dark red sofa was a Clive. He was holding what looked like an Affinity ID and was double checking it against everyone who

walked past.

It looks that way, said E-NA. *What are you going to do?*

Fuck it, Kez thought. *I'm just going for it.*

Really?

Kez turned back around the corner and hit her head softly on the brick wall behind her.

Really, she thought. *Nowhere to hide, might as well face this disaster head on. Maybe if I'm honest they'll kick slightly less shit out of me.*

Good idea, said E-NA.

Also, he's alone. If I need to I can kick him and run.

Bad idea, said E-NA.

Kez stepped around the corner and through the door, her hands shaking in her coat's pockets. The closer she got to the man, the more she could see how equally anxious he looked.

The Clive, a race of aliens from the Andromeda galaxy so ancient that their original name is long forgotten, are one of the more exotic groups in the universe. Currently, they all take the form of the exact same slightly ugly, timid man with a full, bristly moustache, but in the past they've been mountain ranges, chairs, even heat. At one point in their history they were all just kites for a bit, wafting slowly through the air currents on their home world.

You see, Clive DNA is an evolutionary scientist's nightmare. Not only can it completely restructure itself at will, but it can actively broadcast these forms to other Clive, allowing them to match their fellow Clive down to the molecular level. Originally, their homeworld was a free-for-all, with everyone shapeshifting willy-nilly, until society came about, as it does, and with it one of the most incredible political systems in the known universe. The Clive don't vote for who they want to represent them; they vote for what they want to be. After an election is held, the new form passes across the planet, spreading from person to person, transforming them all. Even if an individual Clive votes for a form that doesn't win, they'll likely still choose to change along with the rest of the race. It's just good manners, and besides, this new form only lasts a century. After that they revert to their original, tentacled forms, go back home, and have another vote.

Unfortunately for them, one of their election races[fn15] coincided with their first contact with our galaxy. A seriously remote outpost staffed by a small handful of scientists welcomed them to the Milky Way with open arms. One of those scientists was a slightly ugly, timid man with a full, bristly moustache. Now there are billions of him, presumably

making his home life extremely uncomfortable.

'Hello,' Kez said awkwardly and a few steps too early. 'I heard you wanted to see me?'

'Kezia?' Clive asked, flinging himself out of the chair and holding out the ID to compare faces.

'Kez is fine,' she said, utterly ignored as Clive's head jumped between her face and the awful 3D rendering of her on the ID card. When Clive's brain had finally recognised the match, the tip of his moustache started quivering.

'Oh my goodness, it worked …' He took a moment, zoning out as he reconfigured his entire view of the fundamental construction of the universe.

Not how I thought this would go, whispered E-NA as the two of them watched the strange little man stare into the middle distance.

Me either, Kez internally whispered back. *I thought for sure I'd have kicked him in the balls by now.*

Kez cleared her throat, bringing Clive's attention back into the room.

'Oh, yes,' said Clive, shaking off existential horror and focusing back on his recruitment drive. 'I'm Clive, and I work for a man called Osheen Shupple. We'd like to recruit you for a classified scientific experiment.'

'You're fucking kidding,' Kez said slightly too loudly, as E-NA mirrored the sentiment internally.

'No,' said Clive, handing over an official letter from Osheen. 'This is a real offer.'

Much in the same way that a small amount of potassium violently erupts when exposed to water, this revelation forced a wave of emotion out of Kez. Months of stress and fear reacted with the relief from this moment of dumb luck, exploding out of Kez in the form of several uninterrupted minutes of breathless laughter. Once this and another, shorter burst had passed, Kez read the recruitment letter.

Then, she read it again.

'Time machine?' she asked carefully, staring at Clive as her shaking finger sat on those two terrifying words. 'A real time machine?'

Clive nodded. Kez gulped. E-NA replayed the moment of Kez missing the bottom step, for old times' sake.

Chapter Eight

All Creatures Great and Small

PLANET FARHEART | 2783

Not many creatures in the universe match the ferocity of the Beast of Farheart. Found exclusively on a rocky, airless planet near the centre of the galaxy, this twelve-foot-tall monster has skin made of metal, multiple pairs of worryingly spindly legs, and mouths anywhere that it doesn't have spikes. It feeds off the minerals found in rocks and has an appetite so large that it has dramatically reduced the size of the planet it lives on. Geologists, the ones that survived anyway, believe that previously the planet of Farheart was teeming with life … until the beast systematically killed every living thing down to the microbial level. In short, the Beast of Farheart was a creature to be feared and, above all else, it was a creature to be left alone.

Today it was running for its life.

Thirty-two legs thundered silently across the airless rock, kicking up great plumes of dust that would hang above the surface for weeks to come. For hundreds of miles it ran, leaping massive ravines and occasionally just ploughing through a wall of solid rock, fear forcing its body to extremes, until one of its legs gave way and it crashed, rolling end over end until it flopped pathetically onto its main stomach.

Instinct kicked in and the Beast spread its legs out around itself, feeling for the tiniest tremor. Aside from small particles of rock softly sprinkling themselves across the last few miles, the Beast could feel nothing else. Finally, it had lost its pursuer.

'Boo!' The sudden vibrations from the voice sped across the floor, through the Beast's legs, and into its brain. With a roar from many mouths, the Beast leapt at the source, plunging spiked spikes deep into the rock where the pursuer had been standing just a moment ago.

Nothing was there. The Beast extracted itself hastily, turned, and ran.

When a little fluffy thing from the lower end of the food chain is scared, it knows exactly what to do – run, hide, fake a heart attack, et cetera. But when something from the very top is scared, it's not equipped to deal with the situation. Monsters don't have fight or flight;

just fight. Flight is alien and difficult and exactly why, about thirty seconds later, the Beast of Farheart accidentally fell into a several-mile-deep ravine.

Curled up in a small crater of its own making at the bottom of the jagged orange rock, the Beast let out a mournful howl. Its armour had cracked in a clawful of places and a few of its legs had snapped in half. Hurt and exhausted from the prolonged chase, the Beast of Farheart did something it had never done before: it gave up.

'What are you doing down here, you silly sod?'

The Beast slowly looked up at its pursuer. Two legs, two arms, a small blue haze surrounding them. The Beast had seen many like them before, and most of them tasted awful, but this one was different. Scrawnier. Younger. Their mismatched blue eyes didn't show fear. They showed something else. Something the Beast of Farheart had never seen before.

'Mind if I scooch next to you?' the human asked, holding out his white, differently sized palms.

The Beast tried to roar, sucking air out of its storage sack into its main roaring lung, but nothing came out aside from a slight, high-pitched wheeze that shook nearby pebbles and not much else. The human smiled.

'I'll take that as a yes,' he said, slowly approaching the Beast, hands still up. 'I'm Theo by the way. Pleased to meet you.'

Theo gently took a hold of one of the Beast's many splayed-out legs and calmly shook it up and down. He chuckled to himself and squatted down next to the Beast's head. 'Right then, let's see what we've got for you today.'

Theo took out a roll of fabric and unfurled it, revealing a set of shiny, thin implements unlike anything the Beast had ever seen before. He held one of them up to show the Beast.

'Nano-laced painkiller first. Sorry about the fall, not my intention for you to come a cropper like this. At least the gravity here is lower than where I'm from.' Carefully avoiding a multitude of spikes, Theo slid the syringe in a gap in the Beast's neck armour, causing a white-hot pain to flash across the Beast. It jerked violently for a moment, until, as suddenly as it had started, the pain faded. The Beast watched as its armour knitted itself back together and its legs became whole again. Slowly, tentatively, the Beast staggered to its feet, eventually bringing itself to its full height over Theo. 'Crikey you're tall,' said Theo, standing up to compare their height more directly. 'You ever heard of

an old Earth game called basketball?'

The Beast began to growl.

'Nah, you're right, not the time.' He squatted back down, withdrew a much larger implement, and stood back up. 'Right, the main event! Long story short, some Plofbare experiment in this system went all tits up. You know the Plofbare right? The bat-looking folk? Doesn't matter. Anyway, they caused a right mess. One of the suns is now kicking out levels of radiation that could flash fry a cockroach so …'

He held up the massive syringe.

'… I'd like to give you this. Should stop you from joining the cockroaches.'

If the Beast had understood Theo's English, then it probably would have gone along with him. It had noticed that recently the skin under its armour wasn't feeling as sharp as it normally did, and that its urine wasn't melting half as much rock as it used to. However, as it suddenly felt better, it decided to start running from the fearless, vanishing creature again. It turned rapidly, causing its tail to whip around, sending a foot-long spike hurtling directly at Theo's chest.

With a crack of displaced air, Theo reappeared on the Plofbare ship, a hand on his recall device.

'Christ, that bugger is speedy,' he said, dismounting the long-range matter courier yet again and deactivating his blue oxygen field, which in turn caused his dark brown, immaculately styled hair to frizz up a little. 'Fucker nearly turned me into a torus.'

'Language,' splashed the old Plofbare captain from his giant vat of goo at the centre of this command room, one of only a few rooms on this small science vessel.

'Sorry, boss,' Theo said. 'No need to thrash around like that.'

'I can thrash if I wish to!' Captain Fuum replied, thrashing.

Theo watched as some gunk sloshed over the side, slightly staining the brightly coloured, cushioned floor as it landed. The captain's bath detected this spillage, causing some more purple goo to ooze into it from a padded tap, keeping the captain and his crew safe from their own biology.

Due to some incredibly misguided natural selection, Plofbare bodies are about as structurally stable as a box of TNT rolling down into a volcano. Their organs, if you can call them that, are full of a highly explosive gas, and their skin is flammable, coarse and very sensitive to light, heat and touch. One big sneeze, one stubbed toe, one flap of some seriously redundant wings, and they go up like an atom

bomb.[fn16] This explosive sensitivity also explains the design of these old Plofbare ships. Every surface was padded and brightly coloured, with massive and squishy buttons, levers that responded to the slightest touch and all corners marked out in especially bright strips of neon. It looked less like a spacefaring laboratory, and more like a soft-play centre.

Times were changing though. Nowadays, most Plofbare lived in tall, upright, clear cylindrical vats, full of a thick protective gel. Along the sides and base of the vats were between four and six sockets for various appendages to be attached. This allowed them to work with other members of the Affinity without suddenly taking out an engine room after a celebratory high five. Some of the much older members of the Plofbare race loathe the idea of being stranded in one of these vat suits all day and prefer to let it all hang out in a large, open bath of the goo. Theo's currently assigned captain is one such Plofbare and, after a good long thrash, he settled back down.

'Right,' Captain Fuum continued, the vat of liquid still sloshing wildly, 'do we have a plan B?'

'Of course we have a plan B,' Theo replied. 'Our only problem is that plan B was about four plans ago.'

'Rubbish,' Captain Fuum gurgled, pouring liquid over himself with a cupped wing. 'We Plofbare do not make mistakes.'

Behind him, the Captain's entire crew rolled their eyes.

'I'll recap them for you then, shall I?' Theo said, sitting on the soft ramp leading from the matter courier. 'First, Plan A. That was to stop the experiment crashing into the sun.' Theo looked over his shoulder, out of the window, at a mushroom cloud the size of hundreds of planets, still hovering over Farheart Star. 'Well done on that. Then there was Plan B: capture the creature and bring it onboard. Remember how that one went down?'

The Captain slowly sank into his vat.

'Exactly. Then, Plan C. Using a drone to knock the creature out. Turns out that it's immune to that. Plan D, using a drone to directly inject the creature. Brilliant, if only the creature hadn't eaten the drone during Plan C. Plan E … well, let's not talk about Plan E.' Theo glared at the vat. The only indicator of Captain Fuum was the bubbles slowly popping on the surface. 'Finally, Plan F. Tire it out, make friends, and inject it directly. Didn't quite work.'

With a slow ripple, Captain Fuum remerged.

'I didn't invite you onto my ship to make a mockery of my

leadership!' he snarled.

'No,' replied Theo, climbing back to his feet. 'You invited me onto your ship to save the life of a creature that you have directly put into harm's way. A one-of-a-kind, innocent creature.' Theo stepped back onto the matter courier. 'So that's what I'm going to do. Plan G.'

The captain performed a mini-thrash. 'And what, may I ask, is plan G?'

Theo looked at the captain, smiling.

'Rodeo.' With a crack, the matter courier flung him back at the planet. Captain Fuum swore that Theo's shit-eating grin remained visible for a second longer than the rest of him.

Under an acid-yellow sky, a young boy stood, watching as the very last starship flew away. He begged for them to come back for him, screaming as the tears fell from his eyes, but they couldn't hear him. The thunderous death of the planet under him was just too loud.

Theo came to, as he had done many times before, hearing an audio representation of his heart rate ringing out from a monitor near his head. He groaned as he opened his eyes, revealing the clean white ceiling of a medical facility, the likes of which he'd been in hundreds of times before. The same tubes pumping the same nanobot-laced liquids in and out of his body. The same table of terrifying-looking medical instruments just out of reach. The same inexplicably tiny television wedged in the furthest possible corner of the room. This was a hospital alright.

Damage report, he groaned internally. A scrolling list of current wounds, injuries, and traumas filled Theo's vision. His pounding head took in exactly none of it.

Thanks, he thought, *that's quite enough of that.*

The list faded away, revealing in its place the beaming face of a Plofbare, a doctor, if the white coat floating around in her goo with her was anything to go by.

'Morag?' Theo sputtered through a dry throat. 'Don't tell me. I've died and this is hell?'

'Hello, trouble!' Morag said, far too enthusiastically. 'How are you feeling?'

Theo closed and opened his eyes a few times. When Morag remained after this, he decided that she was really here and that he should answer her. ‘Not great,’ he managed to groan. ‘What happened?’

‘Classic Theo happened,’ Morag began, taking the time to do a backflip inside her mobile vat while three of the six limbs attached to it started to check over all the instruments. ‘There you were, riding that creature, when …’

‘Creature … ?’ said Theo, shaking his head. ‘What creature?’

‘The Beast of Farheart?’ Morag offered with a fanged smile. ‘Big git. Lots of teeth and knees?’

Somewhere in Theo’s head a tiny, quiet thought started to come forward. He just couldn’t quite focus on it.

‘I’m sorry, back a bit more?’

‘Well,’ said Morag, who seemed happy to have someone to talk to. ‘We’d just done this experiment you see, well I say *we’d* done an experiment; I mean us Plofbare, not me exactly you understand. I was always naff at non-medical science. One time at school we had to form our own vat goo and, well, mine came out solid and—’

‘Sorry to interrupt …’ Theo said, correctly remembering what happened to a conversation if Morag gained momentum, ‘do you mind if we focus on me for a bit?’

‘Right! So, we, well I say we; we were trying to keep this experiment in orbit around the sun when it went a bit wrong and …’

A light went on in Theo’s head. All of his thoughts rushed to the forefront and started a song and dance routine. ‘That’s it! Explosion. Lots of radiation. The Plofbare called me to save the Beast. I remember now. OK, forward again in the story please.’

‘It was some classic Theo!’ Morag began, taking the time to do a backflip inside her mobile vat. ‘There you were, riding …’

‘We’ve done that bit,’ Theo smiled. ‘A little further on please.’

‘Right!’ Morag practically squealed with excitement. One of her robotic vat limbs held up a sealed silver bag, no bigger than a packet of crisps. ‘This is what we managed to save of your leg!’ She beamed.[fn17]

Theo took a few moments to process this terribly delivered piece of information. Once he had done so, he pulled himself up onto his elbows and looked down at his own body, masked by a hospital sheet. Instead of two oblong bumps where his legs should have been, there was only one. ‘Bugger,’ he said, falling back onto the bed. ‘I liked that leg.’

‘So did the Beast of Farheart,’ Morag giggled. ‘You should have been more careful.’

‘Careful wasn’t working,’ Theo groaned as he reached for a glass of water. ‘It was time for immediate action.’

‘So you teleported directly onto its back?’

‘I didn’t say it was time for smart action,’ Theo said, spilling a little of the water on himself. ‘Anyway, I got the jab in the Beast so it’ll be fine. Rodeo always works.’

Morag held up his leg bits again, giving them a little wobble so they’d make her point for her.

‘Oh that doesn’t count,’ said Theo, waving the glass back haphazardly. ‘Not my first leg, probably won’t be my last.’

‘Lost anything new since we last met?’ asked Morag, throwing Theo’s ex-leg down onto a table behind her with a squish.

‘Loads,’ Theo said, staring into the rippling water in his cup. ‘An eye, couple of elbows, my philtrum.’

‘Your philtrum?’

‘Most of it,’ Theo nodded, continuing to stare into his glass.

‘I still think you need to upgrade to mechanical components,’ Morag said, preparing a light blue liquid in a syringe. ‘They’ll last longer, or at least hurt less when you get them ripped off.’

‘Nah,’ said Theo. ‘I work with the weird and wonderful creatures of the universe; they understand flesh and bone, not circuits and metal.’ He watched as Morag injected the fluid into one of the many tubes going into his body. As it vanished under the skin, he suddenly felt much less hungry.

‘Well, I can grow you a new leg, it’ll just take a few hours,’ Morag said, scribbling notes into Theo’s chart. ‘Anything else you want replacing before I get on with far, far more important work?’

‘No, thank you,’ Theo smiled. ‘As long as everything is accounted for.’

Morag giggled, synced Theo’s chart with the Affinity database, and turned to leave.

‘Morag,’ said Theo, the playfulness of his tone dropping slightly. ‘Are you … doing alright?’

Morag turned to look down at Theo. How many times had she seen him like this? She pulled up a chair and sat next to his bed.

‘Are you?’ she asked softly. Theo thought about it for a moment before deciding to push down the genuine answer to something that had been bothering him since he woke up. With significant difficulty

he pointed past Morag, at the wall facing him across the room.

'It depends. What's that?'

Morag spun inside her vat.

'The wall?' she asked, confused.

Theo shook his head and held up his cup, tipping it this way and that, watching the water move around inside it. 'The gravity. There's something big out there, and no planets or stars in the Farheart cluster have that kind of density.'

'For an idiot, you can be pretty clever,' Morag smiled.

'Oh now I'm clever?' Theo said. 'You've changed your tune!' He laughed, causing pain to shoot in every direction across his body. Morag twisted a few valves on the tubes, giving Theo's insides a top-up of the wonders of modern medicine.

'So, what ludicrously dangerous and impossible job have you got in store for me this time?' Theo asked once the pain had subsided. 'It had better be exceptional.'

'It's your favourite,' said Morag. 'High risk, high reward.'

Theo smiled a wide, toothy grin.

'You had me at "high risk".'

Chapter Nine

The Cerebral Slammer

PLUTO PRISON FACILITY | 2783

Jack Braddock wasn't enjoying his time in prison and he didn't expect that to change any time soon. Of his seven-hundred-year sentence, he estimated that he had about six hundred and ninety-seven to go, but he wasn't entirely sure. How could he be? He was stuck in an endless, timeless world, with only a hard, smooth floor for company, and he was pretty sure even that was saying things about him behind his back.

Above him, the sky was pitch black, all the way down to the horizon, yet from somewhere there was just enough light to see with. Just enough light to show him the endless nothing that managed to be simultaneously wide and suffocating in equal measure. Here he didn't need to eat, he didn't need to sleep, he didn't even need to breathe. His beard, as short, black and thick as the rest of his hair, hadn't grown a millimetre, and the slight stomach ache he'd started with refused to budge. What he would give for a sneeze.

Occasionally there would be the voice and its three words. They boomed across the nothing, making Jack jump out of his skin every single time. This had been the highlight of his day for the past three years.

'ACTIVATING MENTAL SWEEP.'

Then there was the brief tingling sensation, causing goosebumps to form across Jack's pale skin like moguls, as his brain was checked over and any issues logged and corrected. Seven hundred years stuck like this would drive a man insane and that just couldn't be allowed. Insanity is an escape, and nobody escapes from prison.

'ACTIVATING MENTAL SWEEP.'

Day in, day out, Jack walked. He figured that walking was better than standing still. Maybe, just maybe, he'd find a chair. Or something to eat. Or a mote of dust.

'ACTIVATING MENTAL SWEEP.'

On one day he removed his prison uniform and walked for 10,000 steps, counting as he went. When he was done he stopped, turned, and found his uniform on the floor a few feet behind him. It had been

folded.

'ACTIVATING MENTAL SWEEP.'

He tried to bite himself once, just to see what would happen. His teeth turned to rubber in his head.

'ACTIVATING MENTAL SWEEP.'

The day he tried to crack his head open on the floor was a particularly bad one. As he thrust his head towards the floor, he found himself standing again. He fell backwards but didn't.

'PLEASE ANSWER THE TELEPHONE.'

One day he realised that he couldn't feel any sort of temperature. This place wasn't hot or cold. It just was.

'PLEASE ANSWER THE TELEPHONE.'

The shiny, dark tiles on the floor, each one of them identical, down to the smallest lack of detail. What he wouldn't give for a crack in one of them. A slight bump. A chip.

'PLEASE ANSWER THE TELEPHONE.'

That time Jack heard it. He spun round and saw an old black rotary phone sitting on top of a chest-high pillar. It was ringing. A telephone was ringing in a prison that didn't exist. Jack picked up the phone and his first attempt at speaking in three years failed him. He got it on attempt number two.

'H … Hello?'

'Mr Braddock,' said the nasal voice on the other end, 'I'm sorry to interrupt your sentence, but there is a man here to see you.'

Before Jack could reply, the sky fell, the void folded up around him, and the telephone dissolved into static. Moments later, Jack Braddock found himself back in the real world.

Rehabilitation is hard. For years human beings thought that the best way to stop someone re-offending was to cut off the offending part of them. Stealing? Cut off a hand. Perjury? Cut out the tongue. Adultery? Cut up all relevant parties, their families, and their pets into pieces, burn down their houses and write songs about how rubbish they were. That sort of thing *really* didn't fly back in the day. By the twenty-eighth century, humankind had nailed rehabilitation. If you committed a severe crime, which admittedly was rare, you were sentenced to serve time inside your own head. Using a modified program running through the prisoner's NPC, they could experience an endless, virtual nothing

for hundreds of years, with only a few days passing in real time. Sure, hundreds or thousands of years will do serious emotional damage to even the most solid of minds, but that's when the clever bit happens. Upon release, the prisoner has the memories of their entire experience removed from their head. They'll remember going to the prison, sitting in a comfortable chair, and then waking up a little while later with a screaming fear of the endless torment of infinity, nestled inside themselves somewhere dark. This fear will manifest as a phobia of the entire concept of crime itself. Then, after a few more days of being restrained, they'll be released into the public. This extra restraint serves two purposes. One is to start each person on a course of post-imprisonment therapy, and the other is to stop them from rushing out and genuinely apologising to any and all wronged parties. While society has moved on from its barbaric justice systems of the past and truly understands that rehabilitation works, there is still no faster way to get your teeth kicked in than knocking on a door with a bouquet of flowers and a glittery card that reads, 'I'm sorry I killed your mum'.

Lying, knees up, across three cheap chairs in the recuperation lounge, Jack Braddock was simultaneously trying to and trying not to remember the past three years of his life. None of it was there, but if he looked hard enough at the gaps, maybe he'd at least be able to work out what shape the missing memories were, or why he was so utterly terrified of them.

Jack shook these thoughts off and sat up. He briefly tried to peruse a magazine, but as he wasn't terminally boring, the pages of *Asteroid Farmers Weekly* didn't manage to hold his interest for long. With literally nothing else to do, he glanced over at the only other person in the room, a small, square robot, kicking its short legs out while it waited. Through small windows in its head, Jack could see a pretty white flower with thousands of hair-width cables connected to its roots. Jack gave a small nod, the Tectato nodded back, and a small message appeared on a tiny display on its chest. 'I am smiling.'[fn18]

To Jack, this stilted exchange was somehow less painful than reading *Starship Exteriors Digest*. As long as this Tectato didn't start talking about soil or photosynthesis, he might be able to ration out the entertainment value of that nod for a good few minutes. He needn't have bothered, as at that moment a square-headed old woman

appeared suddenly in the room.

'Jack Braddock?' she asked, glancing between the two of them, large glasses following her gaze on a delay.

'Me,' Jack said, pulling his eyes away from the sentient plant and raising a hand.

'Hello, I'm Val. Come with me please,' she said, vanishing around the door frame before the last syllable had reached Jack's ears.

Hastily, Jack stood, waved the Tectato goodbye, and followed Val down the hallway, struggling to keep up with her ludicrously speedy gait. After about thirty seconds, Val stopped dead and indicated a door to Jack.

'Right, Mr Braddock. Room eight. There is a man in here to see you. When you're done talking to him please contact the nearest member of staff, whereupon we shall return you to prison for the remaining …'

Val flipped through notes on a clipboard, stopping on a piece of paper with Jack's mugshot on it. '… six hundred and ninety-nine years, ten months and two weeks of your sentence. Goodbye.' With that, Val rocketed off down the corridor, almost screeching as she cornered out of view. Jack didn't watch her go, instead his mind was occupied with working out exactly how much of his sentence he'd served so far.

'Ten months … two weeks …' he double checked it on his fingers to be sure. 'That whole time was only … six weeks?!'

Some internal part of Jack crumbled away at this thought. Despite no memory of his time inside, he had an unshakeable feeling that he'd been doing time for years. If that's the state his mind was in after six weeks, how bad would things feel after a year? After ten years? After all seven hundred?

Jack glanced up at the frosted glass door in front of him, a metal number eight embossed in its face. Behind it, he could see movement. His saviour was pacing.

Saviour?

Jack re-evaluated his own logic. Sure, this person had pulled him out of a living hell, but they weren't here to rescue him. After ten minutes of chat, probably about Ipricus, he'd be back in his own head, trapped for relative centuries. Jack felt the pull of anxiety, like a hook through the heart, dragging him down. He fell against the door, desperately trying to catch his shortening breath. *No. Not again.*

Jack pushed off the door, and glanced in both directions, trying to work out which would be the best way to run. As this section of the prison was for the recently rehabilitated, he figured that security

measures would be on the lower side. If he was careful, maybe stole a guard uniform from somewhere, he could probably make it out and go into hiding. Then, if he could track down an unregulated matter courier, he could be the other side of the galaxy in time for dinner. He'd have enchiladas. Jack took a deep breath, decided to head the way Val vanished, and was suddenly covered in a brittle rain.

'Not so fast, darlin',' growled a voice as an arm wrapped around his torso. With a yank, Jack went sailing backwards through what was left of the glass door, flew through the air for a brief moment, and ended up as a crumpled heap on the floor of the visitors' room. The massive form of Alphonse stepped towards him, crushing glass into powder as he went. 'Just a heads-up, this building has a *wild* security system,' he said, patting Jack's potentially dislocated shoulders with a heavy hand. Jack groaned. Some saviour.

Alphonse reached up to the ceiling and ran his thick fingertips over it, feeling for the tell-tale hexagonal bump. He found one, flicked the protective cap off, and carefully extracted a six-inch-long needle. 'A few of these would have been shot at you every second, lacing you with a smart tranquiliser,' he said, holding the needle up, admiring the light reflecting off its transparent body. 'One is enough to knock you out, millions couldn't overdose you. It's clever stuff.'

Jack gently rubbed his tongue against his teeth, making sure they were still all there.

'Look at the design work here,' Alphonse said, squatting down next to Jack. 'My density shielding wouldn't put up any resistance, a Fibril Blue couldn't dodge it, a Plofbare wouldn't explode. Magnificent.'

He grasped the end of the needle and applied serious pressure. The needle held as if nothing was happening to it. He smiled, stretching a jawline that looked like it could drink glue with a straw. 'You know what forty-eight per cent of these needles would have done? They would have pierced right through your body and out the other side. Most of the rest would end up embedded in bone, or, if you're very unlucky, pierced right through a nerve.'

Another groan from the floor. Alphonse chuckled and returned the needle to its place in the ceiling, tapping the miniscule cap back into place with the tip of a thick finger. 'So, what do we say to the hero who saved you from all of that?' Alphonse asked cheekily.

'Thank you,' Jack grumbled into the carpet.

'You're very welcome, Mr Braddock.'

With little effort, Alphonse picked Jack up by the shoulders,

dangling him for a brief moment before gently placing him back onto his feet. Jack staggered briefly, as one does after being recently exported through a door, before regaining his footing and glaring at the man whom, five seconds ago, he had thought of as his saviour.

'I believe you wanted to see me,' he said, offering a hand to maintain some sort of dignity. 'Jack Braddock.'

Alphonse laughed heartily, causing his wild, branch-thick hair to dance around. He batted Jack's hand away.

'I know who you are, lad,' Alphonse boomed, causing his half-finished cup of tea to rattle violently on the nearby table. 'I think we'd struggle to find someone who didn't know who you were.'

Jack winced. He'd spent his life as one of the most renowned and respected archaeologists in the galaxy. Now, one mistake later, he was being taunted by a walking eruption. How did he let it get like this?

'The name's Alphonse, thanks for asking,' said Alphonse with that damned smile again. 'I'm here to pass on an offer from my boss.'

Jack gently lowered himself into one of the visitor chairs to give the impression that he was somewhat in control of this situation. As he sat, a small piece of door fell out of his hair.

'Who's your boss?' he asked.

'Someone with enough clout to pull you out mid-sentence, and enough stupidity to think that hiring a guy who blew up a planet was a good idea.'

'Well, what actually happened …' Jack began, leaning forward and mentally preparing a long-rehearsed sequence of lies and spin that so far had covered his arse about as well as the emperor's new clothes.

'I cannot begin to explain how little I care,' Alphonse said, holding out his hand to Jack. 'I'm just here to know if you want in.'

Jack stared at this outreached hand for a second, before clocking Alphonse's identification badges: four small alternating triangles running vertically down his sleeve. These indicated that he was a member of the Affinity, that his planet of origin was Terbraxia,[fn19] that he worked in the security field, and that his seniority level was seven.

Seven?! Jack thought. *That's a captain rank. Who is this guy?*

Something didn't add up. Instead of waiting a week until his sentence was up, this Besalt needed him now. Now? What kind of archaeology job couldn't wait a few weeks? Most likely one that was incredibly dangerous, potentially even suicidal. If he shook Alphonse's hand here, this could be the last, worst decision he ever made.

'What's the job?' Jack asked.

‘It’s not prison,’ Alphonse smiled.

With that, Jack shook his hand, worrying if he’d live to regret this. He wouldn’t.

Chapter Ten

Twinkle

DEEP SPACE | 2783

As spaceship and teleportation technology evolved, the humble shuttlecraft was put out to pasture. Anywhere worth anything was connected to the teleportation network, and anywhere else was accessible by plopping a Homeship down. Need to get down to a planet from orbit? Well you have two choices. You can either *just appear there instantly*, or you could get in a cramped, shaky shuttle, fly it towards the planet for ages, fuck about with all that atmosphere nonsense, and then discover that the only place to park is the other side of the flaming planet. Thus, the shuttlecraft died of irrelevance, with only a small band of dorky, hobbyist types keeping them running. Osheen was, of course, one of these dorks, which is why he and Bea were currently floating in the sort of spacefaring vehicle that was only one peg above scrap metal.

'Scan again,' Osheen demanded, looking out at the particularly empty nothing hanging around outside his shuttle. 'There's got to be *something* here.'

'Scanning,' sighed Bea, beeping as she interfaced once again with the controls.

'And you can drop those for a start.'

'Drop what?'

'The condescending beeps.'

'I wasn't …'

Osheen glared at Bea. The beeping stopped.

'Anything?' he asked, an impatient foot almost tapping a hole in the floor.

'Hang on,' Bea said, wiggling in her port. 'Last few bits of data and …' The report flashed up on the shuttle's screen. Too much of the text was red to be good. Osheen shook his head.

'I suppose it makes sense,' he said, his hands sliding through his hair. 'Why would she be coming here? This bit of space is deader than dead.'

'Well,' Bea replied, '*she's* deader than dead so …'

Osheen scoffed, then internally scolded himself for it. He gazed at the negative scan one last time, before hoisting himself up onto the panel by the cockpit window. It detected this action and deactivated itself begrudgingly, to prevent any potential butt-warping.[fn20] Bea disconnected from her dock, floated over to Osheen, and landed on his shoulder, snuggling into him as best she could. Together they stared out into the darkness. 'I've always preferred looking at stars from a planet,' Osheen said softly. 'More magical, you know?'

'They don't twinkle out here,' Bea said. 'No atmosphere. No twinkle.'

'That's it, isn't it?' Osheen nodded. 'No twinkle.'

He squinted slightly, trying to use his eyelashes to add a faux twinkle to his view of the stars. Slightly sterile as they may be in space, he still enjoyed the knowledge that for each star he saw, a string of photons had to travel for millions, possibly billions of years, and land directly in the eye. If they were off by millimetres, they'd just carry on, flying forever through the void. He shuddered slightly at the thought before realising that the light would be going at light speed, and thus wouldn't experience time. Then, he shuddered at that thought as well.

'It's like life isn't it?' said Osheen after a time. 'Space I mean. Brilliant points of light, slowly being engulfed by a relentless darkness.'

'Cheery today are we?' giggled Bea.

Osheen smiled, patting Bea on the top of her form.

'Spoken like a true point of light,' he said.

A small beep indicated the activation of a major system, followed by a warm, electrical hum as it powered up.

'You've put the shields up?' said Osheen. 'What for?'

'For the twinkle,' replied Bea.

Outside the window, the light of the stars diffracted slightly as it hit the transparent, fizzing shield. From Osheen's perspective, they now danced and flickered like they had done back on Earth. He tried to smile, but it got caught in his throat.

'You don't think this'll work, do you?' Bea asked softly.

'Not anymore,' sighed Osheen as he leaned his head against the cockpit glass. 'We've not even heard anything back from the others.'

'There's still time,' said Bea, opening herself up for a comeback that never came.

'There always is,' Osheen smiled.

With a flick of his eyes, Osheen brought up some information on the stars in his field of view. One of them, the catchily named MACS J1149 Lensed Star 1, was 14 billion light years away from Earth, and

initially had only been found through a magnifying distortion of stellar gravity. It had been dead for over half the life of the universe, yet there it was, burning away, on a live feed from a telescope somewhere else in the galaxy. He wondered how many stars above him were also dead, and ran a scan for it. The overwhelming majority of stars visible to the naked eye were still around, boiling away for a good few billion years yet, but the further he went out, the more and more were assumed to be gone. The ghosts of giants, watching from the dark. Osheen shuddered again, and turned off his eyeball feeds.

That's when he noticed it. 'Bea!' Osheen said sharply, sitting up suddenly and nearly flinging her across the room. He pointed at a small, rusting rod attached to the front of the ship. 'Is that the long-range transition aerial?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Why isn't it extended?'

Bea slowly turned to face Osheen.

'Does it need to be?'

Osheen leapt up and started slapping the top of the cockpit panel, trying to wake it back up out of butt-prevention mode.

'Did you not read the shuttle manuals I sent you?'

'I didn't get around to them,' Bea shrugged.

'You're an AI!' Osheen yelled, furiously typing. 'You could read them instantly.'

'AI feel boredom too you know …' Bea mumbled.

With a clang, a groan, and a whirr, the long-range communication aerial started to extend. Instantly, alerts came through. Messages from Clive, Morag, and Alphonse were waiting. Osheen's hands started to shake.

'Play them!' Osheen shouted.

'Which—'

'All of them!'

Bea interfaced with the terminal. Moments later the messages downloaded and started to play on the cockpit's main screen.

'Greetings. Kez has been collected and …'

'… long story short, Theo is in the medical bay …'

'… just loading Jack up now …'

'… she seems nervous, but otherwise fine …'

'… and he's never brought up kidnapping before, so I thought …'

'… slight incident with a door, no biggie …'

As his crew spoke, Osheen's eyes twinkled, belief pouring back into

them. He leapt to his feet and started rapidly putting data into the shuttle's computer. A map of the galaxy floated up in front of him, with their position marked.

'Come on … come on …' said Osheen, frantically typing.

A line formed across the map, starting at Earth and shooting diagonally across the Perseus Arm before continuing on and vanishing off the map. Osheen stepped back from the controls, his hands once again in his hair, eyes wildly scanning his finished projection. Bea looked at the map.

'I don't …'

'It's the *Paracosm*'s path,' Osheen said, drawing the line out for Bea with his finger. 'Starting at Earth, travelling, and then exploding … there.' He pointed to a point on the map, halfway along the *Paracosm*'s path, where a small icon marked a memorial site.

'So this bit,' said Bea, a virtual laser pointer following the rest of the line, 'is an extrapolation?'

'Yeah,' said Osheen. 'So look where we are right now.' He hit a few buttons, adding a single new blip to the map. It was right next to the line, much further on from the *Paracosm*'s final known position.

'No way …' Bea said, checking and re-checking the data. 'We're right next to it.'

'Or maybe even …'

Osheen hammered away at touch-sensitive buttons, disregarding just how touch sensitive they were. After a few moments, the projection line had twisted, and was now cutting directly through the icon that represented his shuttle.

'Spooky,' whispered Bea. 'We're exactly on it.'

'I'd not accounted for galactic drift since the disaster,' Osheen said, waving his hands around as if they had separate fireworks attached.

'So, do you think the *Paracosm* could have phased out of spacetime?' asked Bea.

Osheen, hyperfocusing on his work, didn't reply. Bea repeated her question, but Osheen didn't hear it this time for two reasons. One, he hardly paid attention to other people at the best of times and, two, a vast chunk of the *Paracosm* had just ripped itself back into the universe about ten metres in front of them, and everything was suddenly on fire.

PART II

Chapter Four

Moondust

THE MOON | 2154

Lily Faulperk was on the warpath. She sprinted up the stone staircase to the campus library, taking them two, even three at a time, barged her way through a couple having a minor argument near the entrance, and slapped her ID card against the scanner by the door so hard that the door probably would have opened without it.

After several more angry steps she reached the main study hall. A brief scan from glaring eyes found her target, a light-haired pixie cut, hovering just behind a stack of books, each one thick enough to hollow out into a spacious holiday home.

'There you are,' Lily yelled, stopping herself by slamming her hands down on the polished oak. Her hair, surprised by the change in momentum, flew out over her shoulders and briefly muffled her ears from the shushing that came from a corner of the hall. 'Do you know what fucking time it is?'

From behind the books, Eureka Shine emerged, gently lit by the sort of dusty light that only forms in libraries. Her blue eyes were tinged with a sleep-deprived redness, but that didn't stop them lighting up when she saw who was yelling at her.

'Lily!' she said, putting down a book that featured more mathematics than a computer's dream. 'Sorry. Sixth day of daytime in a row,' she yawned. 'No idea what time it is.'

Lily coughed violently, earning her second shushing of the day, and pointed directly upwards to the massive, ancient clock that ticked above them both. Eureka looked up at it, an Earth original, thick with history and dust, then back down to the scowling Scot. She couldn't resist.

'Has that always been there?'

A smile briefly twitched on Lily's face. Victory. 'Fuck you, Eureka.'

'Fuck you too, Lily.'

Lily took a breath.

'It's half past nine.'

Nothing.

'… a.m.'

Still nothing.

'Tuesday,' she offered hopefully.

'Oh. Right.'

Eureka shook one of the many cans of caffeine that were scattered about her desk, hoping to hear some liquid slosh about in one of them. After examining her fourth can, it dawned.

'OH SHIT!'

'Yes shit!' Lily glared.

Eureka began scrambling for her belongings, hastily slamming books shut as she went. The shusher in the corner gave up and moved to a different room.

'Fuck. I'm so sorry.' Eureka dumped the last of her belongings in a rucksack and flung it over her shoulder. They both bolted out of the room.

'Professor Pri is furious,' Lily barked as the two of them exploded out of the library's main doors. 'We only have limited flight time.'

Eureka nodded in breathless agreement, almost colliding with some poor sod as she started down the steps towards the campus at speed.

'If I fail this test because of you, Eureka, I swear to fucking God …'

'Relax, we're ready for it,' Eureka panted back as stationery started to pour, unnoticed, out of her bag. 'What could possibly go wrong?'

'This isn't the fucking ship we were fucking promised!' Lily said, a little too close to Professor Pri's face for his liking. 'It's fucking ancient!'[fn21]

Lily was Scottish. Very Scottish. In 2111 when the independent colonies of the solar system formed, Earth moved to a planetwide government and the idea of independent countries began to fade away. Now, forty-three years later, if you asked someone born in America, Finland or the North Pole Republic where they were from, they'd say 'Earth.' If you asked someone from Scotland, they'd say 'Scotland', then resume drinking.

'Ms Faulperk …' Professor Pri began, the last few grey hairs on his head unprepared for the following conversation.

'How are we supposed to fucking pass in this bucket of shite?' Lily continued, throwing her arms in the direction of a battered, yellowed, and very, very old spacecraft. It had cobwebs on it, despite the moon having been a spider-free world since 2065.

‘Ms Faulperk, I—’ A single grey hair cut its losses and drifted casually to the ground.

Lily stepped closer to the ship. ‘Is that a fucking pre-warp intake?’

Another grey hair folded. ‘Ms Faulpe—’

‘IT IS! A FUCKING PRE-WARP INTAKE! ON A CLASS B MASS BOOSTER?!’ Lily’s angular features sharpened themselves, as if preparing for combat.

‘Ms Fau—’

‘FUCK ME, DO I HAVE TO HAND CRANK THE FRONT TO START IT UP AS WELL?’

‘Ms—’

‘TELL ME, WHERE EXACTLY DO THE OARS COME OUT OF THE HULL?’

‘MS FAULPERK, WOULD YOU KINDLY SHUT UP!’

Silence fell between the two of them. Lily looked ready for a fight. Professor Pri looked ready for death.

‘I have explained this to you and Ms Shine already,’ Professor Pri began, ignoring the burning heat seething out of Lily. ‘You are late. The other ships are gone.’

With a shaking finger, he pointed over at the new, shiny, completely-on-fire number on the next landing pad.

‘That ship is currently out of service. This is an orbital test flight; interplanetary warp will not be necessary. Do I make myself clear or would you rather we cancel today and I’ll mark this down as a failure?’

Lily gritted her teeth with such ferocity that their tips almost formed diamonds.

‘Perfectly clear, Professor.’

‘Good,’ the professor breathed, surprised that he’d survived the encounter. ‘Now, where is Ms Shine?’

Eureka answered the question herself by bounding out of the ship and immediately spinning around to admire it again.

‘I LOVE IT!’

Lily hoisted up all of her anger, turned, and pointed it directly at Eureka’s happy, round, punchable face.

‘We didn’t train for this ship, Eureka,’ she growled. ‘We trained for that fucking one.’

Eureka turned, glanced over at the pinnacle of compact starship design behind her, and looked back to Lily.

‘Nah, that one’s shit.’

Lily’s short fuse self-ignited. Slowly, she turned back to the only

grown-up on the landing pad. ‘Professor, could you please explain to …’ She stopped. Professor Pri was already three landing pads over. He waved from the considerable distance, gave a thumbs up, and vanished into the control tower, presumably to drink quite heavily. Lily counted to ten and took a slow, deliberate breath.

‘I am legitimately going to kill you today,’ Lily said, picking up her helmet emitter and attaching it around her neck. ‘You’re actually dead.’

Eureka stopped halfway up the ship’s ramp and turned back to her oldest friend. She hopped off and walked towards Lily, placed a hand on her shoulder and, for reasons that Lily wouldn’t quite grasp for another year or two, caused her heart to nearly explode out of her chest.

‘Lily, that ship over there might be the best ship in the universe, but it’s new. Brand new. Ten years of testing, but only what, two of those in real world conditions?’ She jumped back onto the ramp and rested her arms on one of the support beams above her, her open coat catching a slight breeze. ‘If that shiny monstrosity over there throws up an error, it means some crystal or conducting ooze is broken behind some immovable panel. If this one throws up an error, it’s probably just because something replaceable has rusted away.’

‘Well, I’m convinced. Let’s go,’ Lily said, sarcasm icing each syllable.

‘Come on, Lily, that ship has broken down just fucking sitting there. Whereas this one …’ Eureka banged on the battered hull. ‘… this one has been going decades. It’s been flown by the very best students here and, more importantly, the very worst. Crash landings, overheated re-entries, and probably more than a few alcohol-based joyrides. It’s taken everything thrown at it for decades and is still going. This old girl, she’s our safest bet.’ Eureka banged it again for good measure and hoped that Lily didn’t hear whatever it was that fell off inside.

‘But we didn’t train for this one,’ Lily said quietly. ‘We’re not ready.’

‘Yeah we are.’ Eureka held out a hand and smiled. Lily looked up at her, making a mental note to ask a doctor about these heart palpitations again.

‘Trust me,’ Eureka said. ‘I can’t do it without you.’

Lily, to her credit, thought about it for at least three seconds.

‘No.’

Lily turned and began to walk away. After a short distance she stopped, sighed, swore violently, kicked the landing leg of the ship, swore again, turned, and silently boarded the ship, barging Eureka’s

outstretched hand out of the way as she climbed the ramp. A few seconds later, her voice echoed out from the interior.

'No fucking barrel rolls this time, Eureka. I mean it.'

Eureka gave herself a little high five and joined Lily in the ship. They took off, and within ten minutes had entered a successful orbit. Twenty minutes later they completed a textbook re-entry and touched down, dead centre of the landing pad. It was a top grade performance, one of the best the university had ever seen, marred ever so slightly by an unsanctioned barrel roll about halfway through the test.

Chapter Eleven

Tomorrow, Six Hundred Years Later

OSHEEN'S RESEARCH STATION | 2783

Emergency teleportation is rough. One millisecond you're watching as a gigantic fragment of a spaceship from the distant past comes hurtling at you, the next you're in a hospital ward, all stark white walls and ankle-high curtains. The trouble is, with normal teleportation your comfort is guaranteed. With emergency teleportation, only your safety is. Things like pre-teleportation warning, pauses for solar flare activity, and being oriented the right way up relative to your destination are all, quite rightly, ignored. As Osheen cracked into existence in this room, several feet off the ground and almost perfectly upside down, the local nanobots encased him in a really rather elegant web-like structure to prevent his fall.

'Well there goes twelve years of mine and Clive's restoration work,' Osheen groaned, far too old to have this much blood rushing to his head. 'You alright, Bea?'

'Osheen …' Bea whispered. 'Look.'

Osheen looked, pulling against the webbing as he turned his head. Suspended next to him, equally upside down, was a body. Blackened on one side and merely burned on the other, it hung limply in the webbing. One of her eyes appeared to be fused closed. 'Oh shit,' Osheen said, beginning a frantic yet futile struggle against the webs that held him. 'Where's Morag?'

Morag burst into the room, took one look at the situation, grumbled something about how they had picked the exact moment that she had gone to the bathroom, and began to work. She rushed over to the group and dissolved the nanobot web with a command, catching Eureka in her arms while Osheen crashed to the ground like a sack of old potatoes. From his view on the ground, Osheen noticed something fall from Eureka's hand and patter away across the sterile floor.

'Is she … ?' Osheen asked, hauling his ancient frame to a mostly standing position.

'She's alive,' said Morag. 'That's all I need.'

Morag's mechanical arms started to windmill around, cutting

clothes, running diagnostics, and connecting tubes.

'You alright?' she asked Osheen. 'Any injuries?'

'No, no,' Osheen replied, patting himself down to be sure. 'Luckily, we had the shields up so when—'

Morag threw him a look. Osheen nodded and took a step back, smartly stepping out of Morag's range, thus avoiding being medically blended.

Morag slammed a transparent hose into a wall socket, attaching the necessary head to the other side. Moments later, she was applying a thin mist of nanobots over Eureka's worst injuries, commanding them with her primary brain.[fn22]

'Fun fact,' Morag said, her secondary brain running the conversation. 'The *Paracosm* is so well documented that Eureka's injuries at the point of lost contact are public domain. If it wasn't for historians, she'd be dead already.'

A machine beeped, followed by another one, until a cacophony of alerts and panicked warnings began to notify the occupants of the room that Eureka Shine had started to die.

'Useless fucking historians.'[fn23] A flick of a metallic arm decapitated the end of the hose, allowing nanobots to pour out faster. When that didn't stop the warnings, Morag threw an arm into the wall where the hose was connected, sending fragments of it back into the room. She waited half a second, then pulled, ripping a section of the panelling away and allowing a full-on stream of nanobots to flood out, smothering Eureka. Within twenty seconds, all that remained of Eureka was her silhouette, coated in a dark blue, shimmering shadow.

Internally, everything from Eureka's organs to her veins filled with nanobots. On the front line, robots were examining, repairing and, after expending their energy, dying. Behind them, the next robot was waiting, ready to jump in. Further back, a final set of robots dismantled and extracted the dead. With these battalions, Morag went to war on death itself.

'Come on …' she said through gritted fangs. 'Your ship exploded less than two minutes ago and you're already in surgery. Nobody with that kind of luck is allowed to die today.'

The woman under the blue shadow convulsed, thousands of nanobots pressing against her heart, acting as a defibrillator. After a few more jolts the alarms started to fade.

'That seems good,' said Bea from the corner of the room she was anxiously hiding in.

Osheen shook his head, stepping back yet keeping his eyes locked on Eureka.

'The readouts are still bad,' he muttered. 'She's just muted the warnings to focus.'

Wearily, Osheen hoisted himself onto a hospital bed. Some of his brain noticed that it was oddly uncomfortable, but not enough that the next event wasn't a shock to him.

'Excuse me,' Theo said. 'You're sitting on my only leg.'

Osheen yelped and threw himself from the bed, spinning around in a panic. In front of him, propped up with several pillows, a lanky guy was waving.

'Who are you?!' Osheen blurted.

'Theo Garnett,' replied Theo, trying very hard to not laugh. 'You wanted me for a job?'

The penny dropped for Osheen. He gave several 'of course' flavoured facial motions before shaking Theo by the hand. 'I'm sorry, it's been a long day.'

'That I believe,' Theo said, gingerly shaking back. 'If you don't mind me asking, who's that under the nanobots?'

'Eureka Shine,' Bea said.

'*The* Eureka Shine,' Osheen nodded.

'Bullshit,' scoffed Theo, incorrectly.

On the other side of the room several of the monitors attached to Eureka began to turn green. Slowly, their jobs complete, depleted nanobots fell away from Eureka, littering the floor around her like ash. The survivors returned through the hole in the wall, fixing it up as they went. Several stayed, knitting themselves into a white medical gown that covered Eureka's body. 'Seventy-eight per cent of onboard nanobots used there,' Morag said, wrinkling her noses. 'Sorry about that.'[fn24]

'It's … it's fine,' Osheen breathed. 'How is she?'

'Well, she's going to need some fucking therapy,' said Morag, exhausted from the battle. 'Aside from that, I'm hopeful. I've scrubbed her radiation burns inside and out, regenerated skin tissue, strengthening her subdermal layer to compensate, and just basically medicined the shit out of her.'

Osheen didn't know what to say, so he simply grabbed Morag around her vat and hugged her tightly.

'You're a miracle worker,' he laughed when they broke apart.

'Just good at my job,' Morag replied with a tired smile. 'Now, if

you'll excuse me.'

With that, Morag began the process of switching off her primary brain. Her arms carried her to the nearest unoccupied bed, placed her down gently, and collapsed themselves, leaving her looking like a spider who had just run several marathons.

'It really is her …' Theo said, making his way over to Eureka with deft use of a crutch. 'I'd recognise that face anywhere.'

'Facial scans are a match,' nodded Bea in agreement. 'DNA is spot on. We could run further tests to confirm—'

'It's her,' said Osheen, unable to take his eyes from her. 'I can feel it.'

'I know what you mean,' said Theo. 'It's surreal, like history has come to life in front of us.'

'I'm surprised she's not in black and white,' agreed Bea.

Osheen took a step closer, only for his foot to meet unexpected resistance. He withdrew his step, crouched down, dusted away a heap of dead nanobots, and extracted a silver ring from the dust. Creaking knees took him back to a standing position, where he held the ring up to the light, admiring it.

'Anyone here married?' he asked.

'I am,' Eureka mumbled, causing Osheen to absolutely shit himself once more.

Eureka Shine opened her eyes, which was surprising in itself, considering that the last memory she could recall had been one of them starting to melt away inside her skull. As her eyelids parted, years of training took over and she scanned her current location in as much detail as she could. After a few seconds, she came to the conclusion that she was in a blurry, overly bright and spinning room.

'Eureka?' asked a nearby fish tank that for some reason was in a bed. This startled Eureka, causing her to flinch. The flinch sent pain shooting through her body, which caused her to flinch again. This went on for some time, echoing back and forth like a painful game of pong. After the rally, Eureka looked up, squinting through the bright lights, at the faces above her. One skinny, one going bald. To her right, one purple and in a fish tank. Eureka, her head swimming full lengths in her head, could only form one question at this time, and about six before she lost consciousness again.

'Lily?' she croaked.

‘Lily? I don’t … I don’t know who that …’ the balding one began, before a flying snooker ball seemed to heavily nod towards the familiar ring he was holding. ‘Oh …’ he said, his voice reverberating endlessly in Eureka’s head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Ignore him, he’s an idiot,’ said the snooker ball, floating in front of Eureka. ‘Lily is safe and well. You’ll see her soon.’

Relief washed over Eureka, causing her to smile for the first time in hundreds of years. It hurt, but it was worth it, and it stopped her from noticing the balding one shooting a look of pure venom towards the snooker ball.

Questions two and three formed.

‘My crew?’ Eureka asked. ‘The ship?’

‘Thanks to you, many survived,’ said the snooker ball. ‘We might even be able to save more.’

‘Bea …’ warned the balding one. ‘That’s enough.’

‘What’s the point of a time machine if we can’t save people?’ the snooker ball snapped back at him.

‘A time machine!?’ exclaimed the lanky one, a little too loud for Eureka’s tastes. ‘Seriously?’

The balding one nodded. The fish tank giggled.

‘Madness,’ giggled the skinny boy, turning around and leaving Eureka’s cone of vision. ‘Absolute bloody madness. Whatever this job is, I’m *so* in.’

Question four.

‘Where am I?’

Balding suddenly became shorter. It took Eureka a moment to realise that he’d probably just sat down. ‘The twenty-eighth century,’ he said.

This particular concept didn’t quite register in Eureka’s head. She’d asked for a where and received a when. ‘Is that a … bar?’ she asked, wasting question five and blearily looking around for some sort of cocktail menu.

‘You’re in the future,’ said the fish tank. ‘Six hundred years, give or take.’ Eureka looked at the balding one and the snooker ball for confirmation. They probably both nodded, but it was getting harder and harder for Eureka to fight off the warm darkness that was clawing its way into her periphery.

‘What does …’

Eureka’s eyes fluttered closed, exhaustion and spent adrenaline finally getting the better of her. The sounds of the room began to warp and fade, collapsing over each other until she fell into a deep,

mercifully dreamless sleep.

‘“You’ll see her soon”?!’ Osheen repeated angrily, pacing up and down the corridor outside a few moments later. ‘Why would you say that?’

‘We have a time machine!’ Bea buzzed. ‘We can send her back! Tell her to lie low!’

Osheen laughed quietly and shook his head.

‘Lie low, Bea? Lie low?! The most famous captain on Earth? There were documentaries. Movies. She won *Taskmaster*! Fuck, she had a *Lego minifigure*, Bea.’

Osheen balled up fists in frustration and, after realising that they had nowhere to go, disarmed them. ‘Eureka Shine died on that ship,’ he said softly. ‘That’s how history remembers it. We must maintain that history at any cost.’

With a sigh, Osheen rested his forehead on the glass window that ran the length of the corridor. He closed his eyes, allowing its cold touch to sooth the pounding in his head momentarily.

‘Are you going to kill her?’ Bea asked quietly. Osheen turned to her, taking a moment to silently wonder why she thought that he was even capable of that.

‘Of course not,’ he smiled. ‘When this is all done we will give her a choice. We can announce to the galaxy that she’s back, or we can hide her away comfortably. Her call.’

‘And if she wants to go back?’ Bea asked.

‘History is too fragile,’ said Osheen. ‘She cannot return.’

‘Are you going to tell her that?’

Osheen didn’t reply. He simply watched the black hole eat the universe away outside.

‘Do we have a record of her wife?’ he asked eventually.

‘She retired from command after the *Paracosm* disaster,’ Bea said, accessing the relevant data. ‘Vanished from the public eye a few months later.’

Osheen nodded.

‘Which is the *perfect* gap for sending Eureka back to her—’ Bea began, before Osheen angrily cut her off.

‘We do not have the right to change history!’ he yelled as quietly as he could.

‘Says the man who just pulled Eureka Shine from the wreck of the

Paracosm,' Bea spat back.

'That's different. I—'

'What if it was Emma?'

Osheen scowled at his closest friend as she targeted his rawest nerve. The usual feeling washed over him, like suddenly falling forever, all at once.

'I'm sorry,' said Bea, backing off. 'I didn't mean to …'

Osheen didn't reply. He just walked away, Bea trailing him after a few seconds. Back inside the medical bay, Eureka slept on, unaware that her very existence threatened the entire fabric of the universe.

Chapter Twelve

Fruit Juice

THE AQUA | 2783

Breakfast, long lauded to be the most important meal of the day, is bullshit.[fn25] This is the meal that is supposed to set you up for the next sixteen or so hours of your life, when in actuality it just becomes the first of your usual grab bag of daily regrets. Popular breakfasts in the past consisted of damp grains, exceptionally fatty processed meats, a cake made of animal blood, and one or two vegetables smothered in the same amount of oil as wildlife after an ecological disaster. Even bread, the humblest of the foods, was absolutely annihilated by this breakfast-think. Imagine taking bread, the first man-made food, perfected over the course of tens of thousands of years, and thinking, 'what if it was burned and smeared in fat'. Your digestive system didn't stand a chance. This is why, in these modern, enlightened times, all that greeted Kez in the *Aqua*'s dining hall the next morning were several rows of multicoloured fruit juices. Kez blearily realised that she wasn't particularly hungry for liquids, and turned to head back outside.

You should have something, E-NA said. *It's a big day.*

Kez nodded, eyes stained red with an absence of sleep. She veered off to the left and stood in front of the closest food printer that was available. With a flick of her tired eyes, she ran a well-worn program, forcing the machine to start despite them usually being locked down until lunch.

'Pain au chocolat,' she mumbled groggily. 'Multiply the chocolate content by … I don't know, eight?'

The machine got to work, knitting together strings of proteins into the exact shape, size and taste of Kez's structurally tricky request, as specifically calibrated lasers cooked it to perfection. In among the rapid movements of this construction, Kez could have sworn that one of the small assembly arms shrugged at one point.

Attention, a softly spoken voice in her ear announced. *Homeship jump in five minutes.*

Kez waved the small countdown away from her vision, far more

interested in the plate that had been gently slid in her direction. She ignored the dishware, opting instead to pick up the violently hot pastry with her bare hands, before deciding that a thin layer of napkin would be enough to repel the molten chocolate.

That's not exactly what I had in mind, E-NA said as both of them gazed down at Kez's breakfast, which looked like someone had tried to camouflage a dark leather sofa using whatever pastry they could salvage from a medium-sized sausage roll.

I need the energy, Kez replied, leaving the canteen and heading out into a nearby park, ignoring the path. She took a bite of her breakfast as she walked, the rupture in its side causing large globules of chocolate to ooze out onto the grass underfoot.[fn26]

'Thuts phucng phantastif,' Kez said, spraying pastry fragments like a combine harvester passing through a bakery.

Now cupping the remains of her pastry in an attempt to supplement its lack of structural integrity, Kez passed under a few oak trees and was thrilled to discover that her favourite bench was unoccupied. It sat alone, away from the beaten path, right next to a gentle, flowing brook. In the distance, a couple of craggy hills jutted out of the ground, perfectly framing the top half of the main command building in a grassy 'V'. Kez ignored all of this, eager to leave this ship of misery. She flopped onto her bench, head on one of its arms, feet on the other, and looked up at the artificial clouds gracefully floating above her. Kez tried to overwrite the security of one to change it into a rude shape, but E-NA didn't bother to run the command and just pretended that it was blocked.

After a moment, the clouds moved on, revealing the glowing nebulae above. Its majestic colours swirled in dreadfully slow motion, as new stars gradually fused themselves together. Kez, staring directly at this majesty, flipped it off.

'Phucng nubola,' she sprayed through the final part of her breakfast.

A soft white light pulsed above her, lighting up the nebulae and revealing the silhouette of an Affinity beacon, rotating away in the stardust. This was used to keep the crew of the *Aqua* in contact with the Affinity, to transfer exam papers and results, and to assist with jumping the massive Homeship safely. Kez had, of course, tried to hack it, but its security system was so advanced that not only did it repel her, it also berated her for doing such a terrible job.

Jumping, a soft voice in Kez's head said. Moments later, the nebulae outside stretched and fell away. After a second or two of visuals that

mixed a kaleidoscope with existential horror, Earth itself unfolded into existence above her. Gigantic in the sky, and covered in lush forests and cool clean oceans, the old blue marble had never looked better. It gave Kez a sense of warmth, of being home, despite the fact that she'd never set foot on it.

Surrounding the Earth were thousands of Homeships, each one a masterpiece of technology and landscaping. From the red, crystalline fields of the Tectato, to the purple soup that filled the Plofbare ships, and even the brilliant white servers of the Compatibility vessels, each ship displayed the sheer beauty of their species' homeworld, despite being a bit of a bugger to work on if you need to, for example, breathe air.

As Kez took in the view, a Besalt ship shuddered past at a particularly close proximity, violating several safety protocols and allowing her to see colossal creatures basking in pools of lava. Kez chuckled to herself, knowing that on a flight deck somewhere, someone just got a right bollocking.

Still chuckling, Kez stood, brushing an avalanche of pastry debris onto the floor. Within moments, a curious pigeon was heading towards his jackpot of the day. Unfortunately, before he'd scoffed a soupçon, Kez scared him off by conjuring some nanobots from the ground around her. Several of them scampered up the bench, fully charged substitutions for the ones that were ejecting themselves out of her neck port, while the rest formed a small sphere which eventually floated off from the ground like a bubble. Kez connected to this newly created floating camera, and wasn't happy.

*Can we do something about this? s*he asked internally, pointing to her red, sleep-deprived eyes. A couple of new nanobots crawled across her eyeballs, injected oxygen into her blood vessels, and massaged them slightly to help them contract. *That'll have to do*, she thought, starting the call she had wanted to make for so long. As her communication began, projecting itself to a faraway space station, Kez worried that he'd be able to tell something was up. She tried lying down. Too relaxed. Standing up? Too eager. Sitting normally? Monstrously wrong. This went on for some time and was the reason why, when her recipient suddenly answered, Kez was trying out the concept of sitting upside down on the bench, her knees hinged over the back of it.

'KEZIA!'

'Dad!'

Filling Kez's vision was the round and ruddy face of her father,

beaming the sort of smile reserved only for very happy and kind sharks.

'Are you upside down, my love?' he asked, twisting his neck to get a better look at her. Kez giggled.

'Are *you*?'

'Guilty!' Fred boomed, showing off the harness that was currently dangling him from the ceiling. 'We've got a liquid helium leak up here on F Deck.'

'Why are you the one up there?' Kez asked, looking at the grey-haired, dangling old man and pouting. 'Surely Ferro is more than capable …'

'Kezia,' her dad said in that soft, argument-stopping way that they teach you when you become a parent. 'If I didn't do it—'

'—some other poor bastard would have to,' Kez finished, shaking her head. Her dad chuckled.

'Besides, you think the supports up here can hold that heavy git? They barely keep *me* up!'

Offscreen, an offended grunt was heard. Kez's dad looked up towards the ground and waved. 'Tell me I'm wrong!' Fred laughed at an unseen, gently offended Besalt.

'So, what's the problem?' Kez asked as her dad re-entered the frame, still laughing.

'Bloody new stem bolts didn't seal,' he said, demonstrating the fact by holding one aloft.

'I told you to get the manual ones!' Kez laughed. 'Have the gravity controls locked themselves on again?'

'Aye,' he replied. 'A few days ago. Terrible it was. Those nice Ellwood fellers were repairing the lights above the concourse at the time. Mrs Pickering was there though, managed to grab them on the way down. Poor old girl, could have cracked her vat open.'

'How's she doing?'

Kez's dad went quiet for a moment. 'Well, Doc Elderflower says she's not got long …'

He went quiet again, calculating exactly how much to share with his daughter.

'Then again, feisty old bat like her, I'd not be surprised if she outlives us all!'

Kez smiled softly, a pit forming inside herself as she wondered if she'd be able to get back in time. Mrs Pickering had basically raised her while her dad was keeping that station afloat. A visit was the least

she could do.

‘Anyway, enough gossip,’ her dad said, waving his arms about and causing himself to swing slightly. ‘How were the exams? All of us back here are dying to hear how they went!’

‘Passed!’ Kez said, her weak, albeit real smile being swept away and replaced by an artificial one. ‘Flying colours!’

Somehow her dad’s smile got wider, causing cavernous wrinkles to form around his mouth. The pit inside Kez grew wider.

‘You’re bloody well joshing me!’

‘See for yourself,’ she said, uploading the marked paper to him. She watched as his eyes darted over it, wondering how low her final score would have been if the answers he was looking at had actually been hers.

‘Well, that’s it. I can finally retire,’ he chuckled. ‘I’m not going to be needed around here anymore.’

He disappeared off camera again, his voice booming around the central command column of his station.

‘Ferro! She passed! I’m retiring!’

A deep laugh came from above frame, as Ferro made several comments about how he’d believe it when he saw it.

‘So when you getting back here?’ her dad beamed. ‘I think this calls for one of my galaxy-famous parties!’

The pit inside Kez threatened to swallow her whole.

‘Actually, I’ve been headhunted for a job … and I start today.’

Her dad’s face fell. He tried to prop it back up with a smile, but that too collapsed. ‘A job?’ he asked, parental concern overwriting all other processes in his brain.

‘Temporal specialist with the Affinity,’ Kez said in a tone of voice that hoped that there would be no further questions, yet knew they were coming. ‘It’s everything I was working towards.’

‘The Affinity?’ Fred blurted, picking out the key piece of information that Kez had tried to bury.

Kez nodded.

‘You?’ he asked.

‘Me,’ she replied.

Kez’s dad swung silently for a moment, the gentle creaking of his harness filling the lightyears between them.

‘The Affinity?’ he asked again, confusion escaping through his eyebrows.

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘You?’

‘YES!’ Kez said, desperately swimming against this whirlpool of a conversation.

‘The Affinity?’ he repeated, trying to make it crystal clear that the communication software wasn’t making a hash of its audio. ‘I never thought I’d see the day.’

‘Neither did I,’ Kez replied, the most honest she’d been for a few minutes. ‘I’m a little worried about it.’

‘You shouldn’t be,’ her dad replied, still stunned by the revelation. ‘They’ll keep you safe.’

‘Just like they did Mum?’ The words spilled out before Kez realised they were coming. Her dad blanched slightly, sending a ripple of guilt through Kez’s chest. A solitary tear rolled up his forehead and disappeared into his receding hairline.

‘Kez—’ he began.

‘We never even got her body back.’

A particularly cold artificial breeze blew over Kez, rustling the trees around her as it passed on by. As she worked out how to salvage this conversation, a message filled her vision, detailing exactly how quickly she needed to get her arse to the administration building to begin filling out her departure paperwork. She waved it away, but not before her dad noticed.

‘You’ve got to go?’ he asked.

Kez nodded.

‘Keep safe, my love,’ he said. ‘You’ve got this.’

‘I’ll do you proud.’

‘You already do.’

With that, her dad ended the call, his smile fading before the video feed disconnected.

Every time, Kez sighed, kicking herself internally.

Every time, E-NA agreed.

I don’t understand why he’s given up on finding out what happened, Kez thought, hopping off the bench in a way that would make anyone older than thirty in the area jealous.

From my experience of humans, E-NA offered, *loss makes you aware of what else you have to lose.*

Can’t be that, Kez thought, solemnly beginning the walk towards a mountain of paperwork. *He doesn’t have anything else to lose.*

E-NA sighed.

You really are a berk sometimes aren’t you.

PLUTO PRISON FACILITY | 2783

‘Up onto the platform if you wouldn’t mind, Mr Braddock,’ said the bespectacled man, mostly through his nose. ‘Feet in the yellow circle please.’

‘Stasis doesn’t hurt, does it?’ asked Jack, climbing up onto the short, metre-wide plinth in front of him. As he stepped onto it, it lit up around the edges with a soft light, revealing the details, or lack thereof, of the circular room around him.

‘Not at all,’ replied the man, pushing his glasses up until they sat back into the groove just above his nose. ‘All we’re doing is freezing your atoms in place for the trip!’

‘Yeah, that sounds like it’s going to hurt,’ muttered Jack.

‘Well … it might,’ nodded the man, causing his glasses to bounce out of their groove again. ‘But from your perspecti— Feet in the yellow circle! From your perspective you’ll not experience any time at all. The stasis cube will turn on, it’ll turn off, and you won’t remember any of the middle bit.’

Jack shook his head. This wasn’t sitting right with him. Teleportation was one thing, but this? Locked away until the whim of somebody else unfroze him? What if they lost him! He could end up stranded, in space, for all eternity, watching the universe die in an instant. Fuck that! It was time to take a stand. Time to fight back.

‘Do we really have to do this?’ he asked politely.

‘Prison policy,’ muttered the man while tapping away at controls that only he could see. ‘If you’ve not served a full sentence you have to be shipped in stasis. You’re a flight risk.’

‘Well, then I’ll go by matter courier …’

‘I mean you might scarper, not that you might nick a shuttle— bloody hell, it’s like talking to a brick wal— FEET IN THE CIRCLE.’

Jack tutted and stood as straight as he could in the middle of the platform, hands firmly by his side, chin slightly up. He suddenly clocked a small metal box floating towards his chest.

‘You’re lucky,’ said the man, walking over and tapping the box with a particularly long fingernail. ‘All our stasis cubes are in use. The person we’re delivering you to lent us one of theirs.’

‘Lucky …’ muttered Jack, eyeing the box with suspicion. ‘Is there going to be a countdown at least?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Starting at ten?’
‘Three.’
‘How about five?’
‘Two.’
‘Three’s fine then.’
‘One.’
‘What do you mean—’
Jack blinked. It took him several hours.

OSHEEN’S RESEARCH STATION | 2783

‘There you go, that should be working now. Give it a tap to turn it on.’

Eureka touched the small silver device that Morag had just attached to her tragus. It emitted a small hum, then spoke softly, directly into her ear.

Loading. Please wait.

‘I can hear it,’ Eureka nodded, sitting up a little more in her bed. ‘It says it’s loading.’

‘Superb,’ Morag said, tapping away on a keyboard that wasn’t there. ‘Give it a second to sort itself out. ECs are slow, but the alternative involves brain surgery, and I figured you’ve been through enough for the moment.’

As Morag spoke, a teal cube about the size of a grape floated over to Eureka, stopping about thirty centimetres from her face. Eureka reached out for it and was slightly dismayed that her hand always sat impossibly behind it. Morag chuckled.

‘It’s just an overlay I’m afraid. Nothing fancy.’

‘It looks pretty fancy to me,’ Eureka said, moving her head around this floating, fictional object. Underneath the cube a percentage appeared, indicating that even several hundred years in the future, loading bar progression was still about as smooth as a gravel enema. After sitting on 99 per cent for a little too long, the cube vanished and a series of settings invited Eureka to calibrate her new piece of tech. ‘So, what can this thing do?’ she asked while calibrating her blind spot.

‘Well for a start, it can do this.’

Eureka looked around. As far as she could tell, nothing had happened.

‘Do what?’

‘This,’ said Morag, enunciating enough for Eureka to spot it this

time. ‘Your mouth is … wrong.’

‘One way of putting it,’ Morag said, her mouth moving in an entirely different way to the sounds emerging from it. ‘Real time translation. You’ll see the discrepancy, no options for syllable replacement like with an NPC, but at the very least I can stop speaking Human. Awful language.’[fn27]

‘Incredible,’ Eureka laughed, not yet realising that she was arguably the very first person from Earth to ever communicate with an alien.

‘Aside from that, it should interface with the majority of controls onboard. Communications, maps, lighting controls, that sort of thing.’

‘Nurse!’ called Theo from across the room, walking back and forth and barely concealing his mischievous giggles. ‘Is this new leg supposed to bend this way?’

Morag shook her head, patted Eureka on the knee with a smile, and went to check on Theo, switching from her primary to her secondary brain to cope with him more easily. Eureka watched her go, so enthralled by the ultra-precise movements of her metallic limbs that she didn’t even notice the streak of light floating in the air in front of her until it was coughing politely.

‘Mrs Shine?’

Eureka looked up. Hovering slightly above her and gently wafting like the arms of a jellyfish was a small bolt of intense blue lightning about a metre in length. ‘Neat,’ Eureka mumbled to herself, reaching out and receiving a massive shock when the hand she expected to pass through an object touched a very real thing.

‘I am Malcolm,’ said the lightning, ignoring Eureka’s small squeak of panic out of politeness. ‘I am a sentient creature known to your kind as a Fibril Blue. Additionally, I am the lead exotic engineer onboard this station.’

‘I thought you were a screensaver …’ Eureka gasped, once again not knowing what in any colour of blazes was going on. Malcolm ploughed on.

‘I am here to talk to Dr Morag about the status of your health, and your fitness for any potential duties,’ Malcolm said, his form shifting rapidly, creating a new shape for each syllable. ‘Do you consent to this conversation taking place?’

Eureka nodded slightly. Waves rippled slowly across Malcolm in response.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Do you wish to add anything, or shall I consider this conversation complete?’

Eureka closed her mouth, then opened it again to completely ignore a decade of first-contact training. ‘You’re beautiful.’

Malcolm’s form suddenly spiralled in on itself rapidly, a series of small pink sparks cascading from him.

‘Thank you,’ he said, regaining his composure and shape. ‘That was an enjoyable, unexpected response.’

With a ripple, he wafted off to converse with Morag. Eureka watched him go, the smile on her face threatening to become permanent. She settled back into her pillows and took a moment to explore her new EC, pulling up a menu from the corner of her vision and coming face to face with an impossible choice. A search bar.

Her mind flooded with ideas. She could find out the origins of the Fibril Blue, the future of space travel, or who the hundred and fortieth regeneration of the Doctor was going to be played by.[fn28] Six hundred and eight years of history, news, people, planets and *aliens* were at her eye’s fingertips.

For about three seconds Eureka decided the best place to start would be a history recap. Learning about the place she now found herself would be vital to her time here. Then, as it often did, a face popped into her head. One with mad red hair, violent eyebrows, and the ability to make Eureka’s heart flutter like a butterfly on a sugar rush. However, before she could type so much as the first ‘L’, Malcolm had floated back over.

‘Morag has confirmed to me that you are physically able to complete any and all potential duties. She also notes that your mental health may be fragile.’

‘That’s … one way of putting it,’ Eureka said meekly.

‘We had a therapy session this morning though didn’t we?’ said Morag, walking past to move around some paperwork and not at all to eavesdrop. ‘I think we made some great progress. We really started to put your past twenty-four hours into context.’

‘What was the phrase you used to describe my mental state?’ Eureka asked.

Morag looked up from the paperwork she was pretending to file.

‘Tonto,’ she beamed.

Eureka looked at Malcolm.

‘Tonto,’ she repeated.

As Malcolm worked out what to do with this information, a new voice popped into Eureka’s ear. Based on its content, she assumed that everyone else heard it too.

‘Morning, everyone … or is it afternoon? What fucking time … Anyway, Osheen here. The first test of the time machine is about to begin. If you have a particular station you need to man, get to it. If not, wish us luck. Osheen out.’

Time machine … Eureka thought to herself, unable to suppress an excited grin. *I’m so glad I didn’t dream that part.*

‘I must go,’ Malcolm said, possibly bowing. ‘If it is OK with you, I would like to continue this conversation at a later time.’

‘Are you flirting with me, Malcolm?’ Eureka asked cheekily. Morag snorted.

‘No,’ Malcolm said, matter-of-factly. ‘I simply wish to make friends with a historical figure such as yourself.’

With that, Malcolm suddenly shot out of the room, whipping away round the door and out of sight. Eureka looked over to Morag and tilted her head after him.

‘You saw him too, right?’

Morag smiled and began to fluff the pillows behind Eureka.

‘Malcolm is very much real, and very much lovely.’

‘Lovely?’ Eureka scoffed. ‘He called me a historical figure, the git!’

‘Well, you are going grey,’ Theo chuckled from the other side of the room.

‘I am not above beating up a man with his own walking stick,’ Eureka called back.

‘I never knew that,’ Theo laughed. ‘The things they edit out of school history books.’

‘School history books?’ Eureka replied. ‘What subject were you taking, “Highly attractive captains of the twenty-second century”?’

Eureka laughed. The room didn’t. The joviality of moments ago had shifted into something else that Eureka couldn’t quite put her finger on. An awkward weight. Someone in this room didn’t know something, and it was probably her.

‘Let’s take a walk,’ said Morag softly. ‘There’s something you need to see.’

On the other side of Osheen’s space station, a ten-metre-wide sphere of iridescent glass hovered in place, suspended silently by invisible forces. An equally shimmery and transparent cylinder curved around it, forming a ring that connected to all eight of the station’s support arms,

ready to draw power into itself, focus it, and fire it into the central sphere. This was the time machine, and it was almost ready.

Osheen stood in this control ring, his fingers nervously tapping out a beat on the closest surface they could find, as he stared out of the curved glass window, unable to break eye contact with the scrap of paper sitting on the floor of the launch sphere, ready to make its journey to the past. In his pocket, the one that had appeared earlier. In the machine, a copy he'd made from his own notebook, to avoid the paper deteriorating through the loops.

'Holding up?' Bea asked. 'Only you look like someone whose dentist's waiting room also happens to be the tunnel of an aquarium, and that you have phobias of both dentists and fish.'

'Nervous,' Osheen muttered.

'Do you think that could be the fault of the view?' Bea said, indicating the black hole ominously watching from above them. 'I'm no interior designer, but I would have pointed the floor *away* from the scariest thing in the universe.'

'It's not,' said Osheen.

'It's not, what?'

'The scariest thing in the universe.'

'What is then?' Bea asked, worried she was about to find out that someone had genetically crossed spiders with theme park mascots. Osheen pointed out of the window, across the separating vacuum, and into the launch sphere.

'That is.'

At the sphere's exact centre, hovering perfectly about a metre above the floor, was the temporal focus point. A polished orb the size of a bowling ball, which was designed to withstand, convert, and distribute the full, unparalleled power of time on command. One crack, one imperfection, one tiny miscalculation with this exceptionally perfect piece of equipment and everyone and everything could be wiped from existence.

'It's going to be fine, Osheen,' said Bea. 'Thanks to that bit of paper, we already know this works out, right?'

'Sure,' said Osheen, unsure.

Ready to commence, said Malcolm over local comms from his position deep inside the floor of the control ring. Osheen shook his head to help break eye contact with the paper and took his position behind a bank of controls and monitors. An unbelievable amount of buttons and switches blinked and hummed gently around him, as thick cables

escaped out of the back of the console and snaked across the floor. He flicked everything he needed to, pressed all the important buttons in the right order, and tried very hard to not focus on his anxious stomach ache.

'Fire it up, Malcolm.'

Malcolm fired it up. A countdown from ten filled half of the available monitors across the station.

'Fire it up'? asked Bea internally.

What's wrong with 'Fire it up'?

I was expecting more. You know, something punchier.

Like what?

I don't know. Something inspiring.

This is only a test, Bea. I'll do inspiring later.

Bea tutted electronically as the countdown hit zero.

The whole command room began to vibrate as the eight energy converters between the time machine and the living area began to unfold. From each one, a pair of mile-long blades slowly unfurled into space, eventually extending out fully with a series of satisfying clunks. Osheen checked the readouts, nodded to Bea, and gave Malcolm a digital thumbs up.

A high-pitched whine built up and quickly petered out as the station dumped the majority of its energy reserves into starting the blades up, giving them just enough of a kick to get moving. The moment they became unbalanced, the black hole took over, dragging the blade down into the ergosphere, before kicking it back out again even faster, generating a small amount of energy which the station converted and stored in an incredibly complicated array of capacitors. Twenty seconds later, the second blade dipped in and out. Sixteen later, the first again, as Osheen noted that the turbines were now generating power by themselves. As the blades dipped in, they began to curve slightly. Time at the tip was moving slower than time at the rotor which, as far as mechanical stresses goes, is an absolute bugger to compensate for. Yet, here they went, going faster and faster, generating more and more power, enough to rip spacetime a new one. Osheen had seen a lot in his time, but watching these colossal turbines blur as they sped through the ergosphere made him feel uncomfortable on a primal level. There was something wrong about an object *that* big travelling *that* fast. It felt impossible, and that was coming from the guy who designed it.

With an almighty roar, the capacitors fired their reserves at the time

machine, funnelling it directly towards the launch sphere. A thin beam of pure, white energy hit the temporal focus point, causing it to become equally as dazzling. Within seconds, the beam finished the transfer, emptying the station of power and plunging it into darkness and silence, the only light coming from the orb itself, which glowed intensely with its newly converted temporal energy.

'Goodness,' Bea whispered. Osheen didn't reply. Bea had said it all.

A green light lit up on the console in front of Osheen. He looked at it, took a breath, and grabbed the big red rotary switch in front of him.

'Fire it up,' Bea beeped.

Osheen jerked the switch to the left, kicking impossible physics into action. Immediately, the temporal focus point started to vanish, tucking itself behind the universe. The readouts went berserk, lights flashing like a Christmas Day rave, yet the station remained oddly calm. If you didn't know better, you'd probably say that space and time weren't currently being ripped apart from each other a few metres away. Silently – or maybe not; there were ten metres of nothing between Osheen and the machine – a bolt of crystalline light snapped at the paper, causing it to vanish.

'Holy shit!' yelled Osheen, punching the air with delight and causing Bea to take evasive action. He twisted the red switch back, causing the temporal focus point to un-pinch itself back into normal spacetime. Once it had returned, Osheen jabbed a series of buttons that caused the focal point to dump any excess energy into the black hole above them in a single, bright beam. With that, the colossal turbines began to fold back into the station, the lighting returned to its default setting, and Osheen breathed for the first time in several minutes.

'It worked,' he said, the readouts in front of him backing up his statement. 'It actually worked.'

From a small vent in the floor, Malcolm emerged, literally buzzing. 'Congratulations, Osheen,' he said. 'An incredible day for science.'

'You too, my friend,' Osheen replied, waving a hand at the many monitors in front of him. 'Happy with the results?'

'It will take me time to study them in depth, but I believe in all but one case, the machine behaved optimally.'

Osheen looked up from his monitors, giving Malcolm a concerned glance.

'All but one case?' he asked, the stomach ache returning.

'The station's orbital thrusters were ill prepared for the impact of the temporal energy,' Malcolm said, bringing up diagrams. 'This side of the

station drifted towards the black hole during operation.'

Osheen concurred with the data presented to him. 'Good spot,' he muttered at the screen. 'Should be an easy fix, no?'

'Yes,' said Malcolm. 'I have already started recalibration calculations and plotted a course to return the station to its original position. However, this situation will have some fallout that you have not yet considered.'

At that moment, Osheen received a message from the fallout on one of his monitors. It was Alphonse, but his usual deep voice had been transformed into a series of speedy, barely legible squeaks.

Heyyouguysalrightdownthereit'sbeenawhileanywayjusttoletyouknowthatfatouma don'twanttowastethetimeoftheleadersofthefreeuniversehahaanywaygetuphereasapa

Osheen, Malcolm, and Bea stared at each other, one of them slightly baffled, another fully baffled.

'Time dilation,' Osheen said finally. 'We've moved closer to the black hole so time is slower here.'

'So not a helium leak then?' Bea asked, slightly shamefully. Osheen tapped a button, adding a time readout to the screen and revealing that this computer believed it was 11:27am, AST.[fn29] A further tap added an error message.

'The data from the living area is coming at the wrong frequency,' Osheen chuckled. 'This is like trying to read a watch as someone pelts it at you.'

Several more taps compensated for the issue, and finally Osheen could see the real time: 3:14 p.m. AST.

'SHIT,' Osheen yelled, running for the nearest matter courier as fast as his ancient legs could take him. 'Fatoumata will be here already! Bea, with me. Malcolm, check the data. Make sure everything is safe for the main event.'

'Affirmative,' said Malcolm, vanishing into the depths of the machine.

Osheen squeezed between two doors that weren't opening fast enough for him, and entered the small matter-courier hub attached to the side of the control ring. He thought briefly that the time dilation might mess with teleportation, causing him to be thrown into space, the black hole itself, or even between two floors of the living deck, but decided that the alternative, a several-mile hike through one of the narrow walkways in the support beams, was a far worse option regardless. 'How do I look?' Osheen asked, destination ready, holding his arms out to the side for a full approval. Bea looked him over,

staring at the few thousand or so hairs on his head, each of which pointed in a different direction; moving down past his grubby lab coat; and ending on a scuffed pair of shoes that she had been planning to fire out of an airlock for some time now.

'You look smart,' she nodded. Osheen shook his head and activated the matter courier.

'I never should have written you that lying program,' he muttered. With a small crack of air they both disappeared from the control ring, bathing it in silence, and allowing the microscopic split in spacetime that they'd failed to detect to spread unabated.

Chapter Thirteen

The Poison in the Heart

OSHEEN'S RESEARCH STATION | 2783

'Another vol-au-vent?' Alphonse asked, bowing deeply as he offered up the slightly grubby tray decorated with his least mucky tea towel, upon which lay exceptionally light-looking pastries.

'Oh go on then,' Fatoumata said, plucking one from the tray. 'Nothing beats homemade now does it?'

'You can tell?' Alphonse asked, his chest puffing out with pride and simultaneously threatening the integrity of his uniform and the balance of the tray on his hand.

'It's the imperfections,' they replied, holding the small pastry up in front of them. 'Maybe a touch too much salt, or a slightly misaligned fold. Choices were made here, choices that food printers don't have to make.' Fatoumata popped the pastry in their mouth, chewed briefly, and took a small breath to enhance the flavour. 'More's the pity.'

'Have you ever eaten at *Cibo a Macchina*?' Alphonse asked, his catering duties abandoned to carry on a conversation about his favourite topic. 'It's a small place on Gliese 667 Cc, and it's run by this Compat called Ludwig. No fixed menu, just experiment after experiment as he explores a sense he doesn't have! Last time I was there I had this algae stack, wrapped in a crispy fried …' He stopped, coughing slightly as the saliva in his mouth began to evaporate into steam.

'It sounds incredible,' Fatoumata said, adding it to a very, very long list of recommendations. 'If I'm ever in the neighbourhood I will be sure to drop by.'

Alphonse laughed, stood, and scooped his tray back up.

'Anything else I can get you? Brew top-up?'

'Well, one more vol-au-vent can't hurt,' Fatoumata chuckled.

Alphonse plucked a very delicate pastry up with his colossal fingers, and carefully popped it onto the plate in front of Fatoumata. 'Osheen won't be too long now. Just final checks, you know?'

With a nod, a bow, and an attempt at a panicked curtsey, Alphonse left to offer his delights to the rest of the room. Fatoumata watched

him go, slaloming round the tables of this barely functioning cafeteria, wiping them down as he went. He offered a treat to Baxter as he passed, but Baxter declined, deep in a very important interlink conversation about a lost shipment of medical kennels. Baxter, Fatoumata's right-hand-man, wasn't a man at all. He was a Yap, one of the key races of the Affinity. On Earth, man evolved from the ape. On Ball, Yap evolved from the canine, making them an incredibly peaceful, four-legged race. They were loyal, emotionally intelligent, and often wet for no explainable reason.

'Pearl,' he barked; not angrily, it was just how he spoke. 'Come on, cut me some slack here …'

Fatoumata chuckled. He'd grown so much since they had first met when he was just a timid young pup working his way up through the mineral distribution department. Now he was organising the largest resettlement in anyone's history books, and his tail was still wagging as fast as ever. Not a bad best friend, by any measure.

'Fatoumata!' exclaimed Osheen, striding across the cafeteria, Bea in his wake. 'What brings you to this starless void of mine?'

'An old friend of mine is demonstrating his time machine today,' they said, standing to hold him by the shoulders and taking a good look at him. 'I'm here to cheer him on.'

'Even though he's late to his own party?' Osheen asked sheepishly.

'I'll forgive you, but only because the food was so good.'

Something small hit the other side of the kitchen shutters. Fatoumata wondered if one of Alphonse's shirt buttons had finally succumbed to the build-up of pride.

'Besides,' they continued. 'You're always late.'

'Oh you know me,' Osheen said, stepping back to dismantle the embrace. 'Always putting out fires.'

Fatoumata cocked their head.

'An issue with the machine?'

'No, no, nothing to worry about,' Osheen said, shaking his head. 'Just an orbital wobble that we've already corrected. Normally that's fine, planets aren't perfectly round, but a wobble next to a black hole? Well, time goes walkabout.'

Fatoumata uncocked their head.

'So, if I understand you correctly, this station has fallen slightly into a black hole?'

'Yeah,' Osheen smiled. 'Like I said, nothing to worry about.'

A pathetic cough from behind Osheen indicated the arrival of Clive,

who in turn indicated the arrival of Osheen's time travellers. 'They're here,' said Clive, damply. An immediate panic fell upon Osheen's face. He quickly attempted to wrestle it into a better expression, but if that eyebrow of Fatoumata's that just went flying up their forehead was anything to go by, he'd absolutely botched it.

'Marvellous!' said Osheen, a little too loud. 'Fatou, if you'll excuse me, I have to prepare the final part of today's demonstration. It shouldn't take too long.'

'No rush,' Fatoumata said, thankful they'd booked the entire day off for this. 'However, I'd better be placated with some more of Alphonse's excellent treats.'

Another button hit the shutter.

When she took command of the *Paracosm*, Eureka Shine was briefed on the very slight possibility that she would travel in time. Ever since Hafele and Keating fannied about with three atomic clocks, we've known that time is only relatively stable. To put it in layman's terms, and while avoiding the sort of mathematics most of us would only see in a nightmare where we were late for an exam and trouserless, speedy things experience time slower. If the *Paracosm*'s engines didn't have time-dilation suppression, or if those systems failed, then the ship could end up travelling into the far future without anyone onboard noticing. This meant that when Eureka found herself standing on a space station orbiting a black hole six hundred years in the future, she felt surprisingly prepared. That is, until she saw her plaque.

The dark square, complete with a highly detailed, if slimmed-down, bust of herself protruding from it, hung by the entrance to the ship's bridge. Under Eureka's bronze self, there was an inscription:

Eureka Shine
The Woman
Who Unified Us

'We have one of these on every Affinity ship,' said Morag from slightly behind her. 'You're kind of a big deal.'

Eureka opened her mouth for words that would never arrive. She took several breaths in anticipation, and exhaled them unused.

'The *Paracosm*,' said Theo, his left hand gesticulating, his right unable to stop prodding his newly attached leg. 'It left a trail. A strip of

glowing radiation burned into the night sky. Into *every* night sky. Other worlds took notice. They headed to the stars to follow it to its origin.'

'I led them to Earth?' asked Eureka softly.

Theo nodded. 'Two years after the *Paracosm* disaster, Earth made first contact. Sixteen years later, we joined the Affinity.'

Eureka stared at herself a little longer. Neither she nor the plaque seemed to want to blink.

'So, what does that make me?'

Theo took her hand. 'The same thing you were yesterday. You are Eureka Shine.'

For a while, Eureka stood there, unable to break eye contact with her bronze self. A dark feeling dripped down her spine, like the one that makes you run up the stairs at night to escape the monsters.

'This isn't me,' she said softly. Her mind rolled back, replaying the launch of the *Paracosm*. Several systems were overheating beyond their safe limits. There were even reports of structural damage. Why hadn't she aborted the launch? Why had she ignored the rules she took so long to learn?

'Hey,' said Theo. 'Don't do that.'

Eureka snapped out of her spiral, looking over at Theo with reddening eyes. 'I'm no hero,' she said. 'I made mistakes. People died because of me. Do you know what that feels like?'

'I do,' said Morag, handing this sudden therapy session over to her social brain. 'No matter how hard I try, not everyone leaves my care alive.'

'Now she tells me,' said Theo, trying to nudge a small chuckle out of Eureka and failing. Morag shot him a look. He smiled, nodded politely, and left the immediate area as quickly as he could.

'It's not the same,' said Eureka. 'You're still able to make a difference. My life is on that wall, encased in bronze.'

Eureka turned, sliding down the wall under her plaque. Morag sat down opposite her, her vat clunking down onto the hard floor.

'I now know that I've accomplished everything I ever will, and my biggest achievement was an accident,' Eureka said, tears starting to flow. 'Some legacy.'

'So you believe you have nothing left to work towards?' Morag asked.

Eureka pointed up at the plaque, '2134–75. I'm dead.'

'As your physician, I disagree,' Morag smiled warmly.

'You know what I mean,' Eureka sniffed. 'My remains are out there

somewhere.'

'Only if you want them to be,' Morag replied.

Eureka, instead of arguing, considered for the first time that this didn't have to be a return trip. She could stay, exploring this new world, meeting aliens, and working with impossible new technology. A childhood dream come true. If only her other childhood dream didn't take priority.

'I need to get back to Lily,' Eureka confirmed to herself.

'That sounds like something to work towards,' said Morag. 'It's no piloting experimental ships, but a life with the one you love sounds like an accomplishment to me.'

Eureka nodded slowly.

'Let's plan for a few sessions together where you talk me through your life,' Morag offered. 'Update the legacy, if you will.'

'I like the sound of that,' Eureka said, wiping tears from her eyes. 'Straighten the record.'

'Exactly,' said Morag, levering herself to a standing position and offering Eureka a metal limb. 'Also, just putting it out there: if you ever wanted to prank some historians there will literally never be a better time than this.'

'Could you imagine?' Eureka laughed, the two of them wandering off, leaving the plaque behind.

'Bugger imagining,' said Morag. 'I'm already sending the invites out.'

Space unfolded around Kez, dumping her into a large matter-courier room that had seen better days. The walls were rusting away, exposing anarchic wiring and creaking support beams, while the majority of the floor was buried under heaps of loose technology or stacks of metal crates, each one battered or dinged in some way. Kez immediately had to restabilise her footing, the poorly calibrated artificial gravity making her feel like she was on a pogo stick in the middle of the ocean. 'What a shithole,' she summarised neatly.

With a small hop she jumped off the platform, briefly wondered if the stairs for it lay unconstructed in one of these crates, and then spotted the man who had been standing behind her the entire time.

'Goodness gracious!' she didn't yell, taking a precautionary step back before realising that the man hadn't moved a muscle, even with her sudden outburst of multiple unpleasant phrases. His face was frozen,

mouth open and eyes slightly narrowed, like he was mid-way through asking a question.

'The fuck?' she said to herself, cautiously stepping back up onto the platform to get a closer look. 'Is he dead?'

Probably not, replied E-NA. *I'm detecting a temporal stasis field around him.*

'I didn't know you could detect things like that,' Kez said, poking the man in the face and, instead of flesh, feeling the impossibly smooth fizz of an energy shield as a green ripple spread out from the point of impact across his body.

Well, I can see it, said E-NA, desperately holding back thousands of pre-programmed snide comments. *On his chest, that metal box is a temporal stasis field generator.*

'Neat,' Kez said, tapping the metal box. 'What do you think he's been frozen for?'

Probably the usual reason, said E-NA. *Prisoner transport.*

Kez took a few hurried steps back before entering a stance that she felt made her look combat ready, yet actually made her look like she was about to hang up washing that she was allergic to.

'Hang on …' she said, arms at severely dangerous-looking angles. 'Isn't that—'

'Kezia!' said a practically ancient man suddenly entering the room at considerable speed, an NPC shell following. 'I'm Osheen and this is my assistant, Bea. Welcome to my station!'

Shit, said E-NA, withdrawing connections to local systems to remain hidden. *I wasn't expecting a Compat.*

'Kez is fine,' said Kez, simultaneously forcing a smile and trying to remember if 'Osheen' was the name of the person she was here to meet. She took a punt. 'I'm excited to work with you.'

'And I you,' said Osheen. 'Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to your partner.'

Kez froze, as did E-NA.

He can't mean you, thought Kez. *Right?*

He didn't mean E-NA. Osheen darted past Kez, up onto the platform, and took a few moments to fiddle with the stasis cube.

'There we go!' said Osheen, stepping back as the metal cube started to hum. After a moment, a green forcefield appeared around the man, tight to his outline. It shimmered briefly in the artificial lighting, until it suddenly shattered and cascaded to the ground, fizzing away as it sparked across the floor. Osheen caught the metal box before it hit the

floor and pocketed it.

‘—one?’ said Jack, stumbling forward as his body suddenly realised time was a thing again.

‘Easy, lad,’ Osheen said, offering an arm in support. ‘Let your legs wake up first.’

Jack took Osheen up on his assistance, resting for a moment before clocking the change in both the scenery and audience.

‘What the—?’

‘Welcome aboard!’ Osheen said happily, propping Jack’s weight back onto his own feet. ‘I’m Osheen, this is Bea, and that startled-looking young lady down there is Kezia.’

‘Kez is fine,’ Kez repeated.

‘Why … ?’ began Jack, his synapses firing off for the first time in a while.

‘Alphonse offered you a job,’ said Osheen, watching Jack’s tentative steps carefully. ‘You accepted.’

‘I think I remember that,’ blinked Jack, stepping down and immediately tripping slightly over one of the many chaotically strewn bits and bobs on the floor. ‘Nice place.’

‘Sorry about that,’ said Osheen, gathering a few things, realising they had nowhere to go, and just dumping them back onto a random pile. ‘Anyway, we’ve not got a huge amount of time so …’

A map of the station formed between the three of them, projected by Bea.

‘We’re here,’ Osheen said, pointing to the third of seven floors. ‘I need you to go up here, to the conference room on the top floor, next to the bridge.’

Kez studied the map, slightly concerned that the conference room that Osheen had just pointed out was labelled ‘Storage’.

‘Why does the fifth floor say “CONTAMINATED”?’ Jack asked.

Sure enough, the fifth floor’s label had the word ‘Recreation’ crossed out, and ‘CONTAMINATED’ above it in aggressive red lettering.

‘An issue with a food printer,’ Osheen said. ‘We didn’t notice it for years.’

He shuddered in a way that made Kez not want to question any further. He’d clearly seen and smelled things that no man was meant to.

‘Anyway,’ Osheen said, snapping back to the present and shepherding Kez and Jack out of the room. ‘Just down the corridor and up two flights of stairs. I’ll join you and your teammates shortly.’

‘Stairs!?’ Kez began, but was abruptly shut off by the doors slamming shut between them, separating the two groups and leaving Kez and Jack to walk off in silence, the natural moment for introductions slipping by awkwardly. As they walked, E-NA fired off some encrypted requests to a fellow Compat that owed her a favour.

Back in the matter courier room, Osheen leaned his forehead against the door, mentally checking another bullet point off his to-do list.

‘What’s next?’ he asked Bea.

‘Brief the team, convince them to travel in an almost definitely dangerous time machine, and lie to the highest-ranking human that we’re in complete control of the situation.’

‘Anything else?’ Osheen grumbled sarcastically.

‘Yeah,’ said Bea. ‘Do all that in less than twenty minutes.’

Osheen nodded, not to agree to anything, just to make it look like he was listening.

‘What’s the morality of using a time machine to get a nap in?’ he enquired.

Thankfully for Bea, and philosophy in general, a wooden box had just folded out of space and landed onto the matter courier. Osheen approached carefully as Bea floated over and scanned the newcomer.

‘Not detecting any radiation or the like,’ Bea said, buzzing around the box as Osheen double-checked her work. ‘Seems safe to me.’

Osheen picked the box up and inspected it. It was latched, beautifully varnished, and the size of a good book. One corner was pressed in slightly, likely from an impact. ‘A dent?’ he said, his hand running over the mark. ‘I wonder what caused that?’

Frowning at the box, he opened it to inspect the cargo within. His frown dissolved. ‘Oh,’ he murmured as a smile split his face apart. ‘I hope this never gets old.’

The feeling didn’t last. About ten seconds later, someone threw a punch at his head, absolutely killing the mood.

Kez and Jack entered the small conference room and immediately realised that this was simply a title given to whatever room had the least boxes in it, despite its label of ‘Storage’. Sitting on a couple of these boxes were a dreadfully spindly man with skin the colour of barely flavoured yoghurt, and a woman that both Jack and Kez wondered briefly if they knew.

‘Morning, all,’ said Theo, leaping up from his box to energetically shake hands with Kez. ‘I’m Theo.’

‘Kez,’ said Kez, putting far less effort into the handshake. ‘Any idea what …’

Kez trailed off, as did Theo, both of them locking eyes with different people.

‘You’re not … ?’ said Theo to Jack.

‘Are you … ?’ said Kez to Eureka.

‘Jack Braddock?’ asked Theo.

‘Any relation to Ethel Shine?’ asked Kez. The room looked at her. She, the room.

‘Wait,’ she said, taking a step away from Jack. ‘Jack Braddock? The … planet guy?’

Jack nodded uncomfortably. ‘Yeah. That’s me.’

‘Who?’ asked Eureka, ever so slightly annoyed that Kez had got her name wrong.

‘He’s been in the news loads recently,’ said Theo, eyes wide with fascination. ‘Trial of the century.’

‘Why?’ asked Eureka. ‘What did you do?’

‘I … blew up a planet.’ Jack sighed, before blurting out his usual disclaimer. ‘An *uninhabited* one!’

‘A planet?!’ gasped Eureka. ‘A whole planet?!’

‘It was a big one too!’ added Bea as she and Osheen entered the room.

‘All planets are big, Bea,’ Osheen said, looking extra frazzled as he plonked a wooden box down on a stack of crates. ‘Jack here just got out of rehabilitation. Seven hundred years of it.’

‘Blimey,’ said Theo.

‘You look good for it,’ nodded Eureka, lost.

‘Sorry for mentioning it …’ Kez stumbled, ‘I didn’t mean to …’

Jack waved this thought away, slightly concerned at the ease with which Osheen just lied for him.

‘No, it’s fine. Thanks for apologising,’ he said, guilt catching the odd syllable as it left him. ‘We should be able to talk about it, especially if we’re going to, I assume, work together.’

‘Why?’ asked Eureka, looking at Jack with a face of confusion.

‘Why what?’

‘Why did you blow up a planet?’

Osheen shook his head. ‘Eureka, I’m already late as it is and I don’t think it’s a good idea to—’

‘Eureka?’ said Jack, tilting his head at her.

‘We’ll get to that in the briefing,’ said Osheen, shooing Jack into a seated position on a stack of boxes.

‘Ipricus, the planet, was *the* archaeological find of the century,’ interrupted Jack, eager to get ahead of this. ‘It was on the verge of taking the history of this galaxy and turning it upside down and inside out.’

‘So, why destroy it?’ Eureka asked, still wondering how you could even blow up a planet in the first place.

‘Because, I am—’

Jack caught himself.

‘I *was* the foremost expert of that previous history.’

‘Ah,’ said Eureka, perfectly summarising the feelings of the room.

‘I’ve got to ask though,’ Jack said. ‘The name, the face, you must be a descendant of Captain Shine.’

‘I thought the same,’ said Kez. ‘She looks just like the big statues.’

Eureka turned around to Theo.

‘*Big* statues?!’

Theo exploded into laughter. Eureka joined in heartily, leaving Kez and Jack to wonder what the joke was.

‘Probably a good idea to get started!’ coughed Osheen, nudging the conversation back to the matter at hand. He walked over to the front of the room, pulled a dusty cover from a freestanding blackboard, and ignored the groan from the crowd when they saw the heavy mathematics chalked onto it.

‘Hello. My name is Osheen Shupple,’ he said, taking a small pause to add a little flair. ‘I’ve built a time machine, and I’d like you four, Kez, Theo, Jack, and Eureka, to become the first professional time travellers, and discover the answer to the oldest secret in the universe.’

Osheen had expected a stunned silence to meet this historic statement. The muttering wasn’t part of the plan. Jack raised an eyebrow. Kez raised a hand.

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘About seven hundred years ago the Clive received a signal from Earth,’ Osheen said. ‘Well, I say a signal, it was a warning, sort of. There’s a man, probably, Austin Lang, and … well …’

He trailed off, rooting around in his pockets for a prop that would explain everything much better.

‘I meant, why us?’ Kez asked, already puzzled by so much of this conversation. ‘Can’t you do it yourself?’

‘Oh I’d love to,’ said Osheen, his voice utterly genuine. ‘Unfortunately, my crew and I are the most qualified to look after the station in the event of any failures or emergencies.’

‘Sorry,’ said Jack, Osheen still searching. ‘Did he just say … time travel?’

‘Wouldn’t be my first time,’ giggled Eureka, nudging Theo. Jack watched this display, wishing he had access to a facial topography scanner right about now.

‘Found you!’ Osheen said, fiddling with the dataflake that he’d just pulled out of his pocket. After a few seconds, it played the message.

‘Whatever you do … if you’re able to, do the thing I … Kill him. Kill Austin Lang before he wipes out the universe.’

The group looked at each other, eyebrows akimbo. ‘Whose voice is that in the message?’ asked Jack. ‘I can’t place the accent.’

‘We don’t know,’ said Osheen, panic-pausing the device after it started to play again. ‘But we think the accent is old London. Seven centuries at least. That’s about when the Clive heard it.’

‘If the message is from the past,’ said Theo, ‘especially that far into the past, why do you think it’s a warning about the future?’

‘Hang on,’ interjected Kez, ‘how did the Clive pick it up, but we didn’t? I’m pretty sure that we could detect radio signals back then.’ Her confidence drained at the silence in the room. ‘… right?’

‘The kid’s got a point,’ nodded Eureka.

‘Kid?’ said Kez, her eyebrows narrowing.

‘Right, but it wasn’t a radio signal,’ Osheen said. ‘It was audio, encoded in a burst of energy. High energy but that’s obvious really, considering it got all the way out to one of the Clive’s satellite planets in Andromeda.’[fn30]

‘Oh, satellite planets!’ Jack said, his face lighting up. ‘I visited one, years and years ago. Nothing like them in the universe.’

A brief silence filled the room, as everyone’s eyes moved in Jack’s direction while their heads refused to budge.

‘I don’t have a thing for wrecked planets, OK?’ Jack pouted. ‘Anyway, if this signal was broadcast from Earth seven hundred years ago, how come we couldn’t find the device that sent it?’

‘Wait!’ yelled Theo, leaping to his feet and pointing to Osheen. ‘Shut the fuck up.’

Osheen smiled. ‘I think Theo’s got it.’

‘The signal,’ said Theo, his hands flailing about. ‘It wasn’t sent from Earth seven hundred years ago. It was *heard* seven hundred years ago.’

‘Correct.’

‘By the Clive.’

‘Correct.’

‘Who are from a different galaxy!’

Osheen laughed. Theo grabbed hold of his head to stop it running off without him. Kez just shrugged. She’d taken too many exams recently and didn’t have the mental capacity left to work this out.

‘Wouldn’t that mean that this signal is old?’ Eureka asked. ‘Like … really old.’

‘That warning,’ Osheen nodded, ‘spoken in English and broadcast on quite advanced technology, was broadcast around two point five million years ago, at the literal dawn of the human race.’

It was about this point that Osheen got his stunned silence. He revelled in it briefly before continuing.

‘Your job is to find whatever broadcast it, retrieve it, and then the Affinity can begin tracking down whoever Austin Lang may be.’

Jack raised a hand, then pointed it at Eureka. ‘Is … ?’

‘Yes,’ said Osheen, chuckling. ‘That is *the* Eureka Shine, recovered from the temporal explosion of the *Paracosm*.’

Theo chuckled as Kez and Jack turned to Eureka, to each other, and then back to Eureka again. For the briefest moment, returning to prison didn’t look too terrible to Jack. At least endless nothing was calm.

‘So,’ asked Theo, ‘why not just search for any Austin Langs in the galaxy and, you know, arrest them?’

‘Arrest them for what?’ Osheen asked, pointing to a section of the blackboard that nobody but him understood. ‘They’ve not done anything yet. The one we’re looking for might not have even been *born* yet!’

‘You did search for Austin Langs though, right?’ asked Kez. ‘On the Affinity databases?’

‘Oh yes. There aren’t any.’

Theo leaned in. ‘… *any*?’

Osheen thrust an extended finger against the blackboard, accidentally smudging a few hours of work with a squeak.

‘Several decades ago we discovered a virus in the heart of the Affinity,’ he said. ‘It’s been there for hundreds of years, scattered and

encrypted deep in the base code.'

'In the base code?' exclaimed Jack. 'Isn't that beyond complicated to understand?'

Osheen nodded, his face an expression that roughly said, 'and then some'.

'The base code of the Affinity isn't just complicated, it's deliberately complicated,' he explained. 'It's written in the form of a four-dimensional maze. The code itself is impossible to navigate without dedicating your entire life to studying it, and requires several people at this skill level working together to access it at all.'

'Blimey,' said Eureka. 'Isn't that a bit overkill?'

'With so many lives dependant on it, you can't just have a random hacker wander in and turn off something important like … air. Or history.'

Eureka took an extra deep breath, just to be on the safe side.

'So what does this virus do?' Theo asked.

'It turns off history,' said Osheen. 'Any reference to Austin Lang is wiped. News articles, records, even physical materials have vanished as a result of damage from temperature changes or sprinkler systems. Austin Lang is a ghost and determined to stay that way.'

'Nobody spotted this?' Jack asked, more than slightly concerned at this point. 'Not one person?'

'Have you ever just searched for a random name?' Osheen replied. 'Jill Bough, Percy Trip, Steven Toast? Even if you did, would you find zero references suspicious? How many Ted Karfunkles do you think there are in the galaxy?'

'Three?' offered Theo.

'I'd have said six,' said Eureka.

'No chance.'

'You want to bet, New Leg?'

'Bring it on, Textbook.'

'So you're telling me,' Jack said, interrupting the children, 'that every city, every ship, every fucking bathtub, is running code controlled by an unknown party?'

'That is why I managed to convince the Affinity to allow me to construct a time machine,' Osheen replied. 'We are in desperate times, despite what some on the council might think.'

'Well then, Kez asked the right question,' Theo said, his brain running overtime. 'I'm a jumped-up vet, Eureka is a historical figure, Jack is … known, and Kez over here is still wearing a student uniform.'

‘I graduated yesterday,’ said Kez, slightly offended.

‘Mazel tov,’ grunted Jack.

‘It’s not important,’ said Osheen, his skin blanching slightly.

Jack stood. ‘It feels important,’ he growled.

‘I can assure you, it isn’t,’ Osheen said, attempting to match Jack’s stature, yet looking like a blobfish standing up to an oncoming train. ‘Now please, sit down.’

‘We’ll come back to this,’ Jack said, sitting down on a box as menacingly as he could. Osheen managed to swerve a whimper into a cough.

Five minutes, Bea said internally to Osheen. *Hurry it up.*

‘The mission then!’ Osheen sputtered. ‘Reconnaissance. A trip two and a half million years into the past to discover the source of the message and report back here. Then—’

‘Does here have a name?’ Eureka interrupted.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Osheen blinked.

‘This station,’ Eureka replied. ‘Does it have a name?’

‘It doesn’t even have a fucking crew,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘I’ll be surprised if it has a name.’

‘It does have a crew actually,’ Osheen said, obviously more than a little hurt. ‘It’s a skeleton crew for now, but the majority of essential positions are fil—’

‘What about *Lucas*?’ interrupted Theo.

‘I love it!’ giggled Bea.

‘Nice name,’ Kez nodded.

‘*Lucas* it is,’ said Jack, smiling less at the name, and more at the visible displeasure on Osheen’s face.

‘Right …’ Osheen said, as Bea deleted the name ‘*Chronopolis*’ from his mental memos. ‘After you’ve reported back to … *Lucas* … we’ll decide if any further action is required on your part.’

‘Further action?’ grumbled Jack. ‘So this isn’t a one and done?’

‘It might be,’ said Osheen. ‘However, if the first trip reveals any leads then …’

He trailed off, watching as the mood in the room dropped to a new low. In front of him, four people contemplated the fact that they’d been called up to potentially fight a temporal war. Osheen responded to this by deciding to cheer everyone up the only way he knew how. Toys.

‘On the bright side, if it does come to that, I’ve built some cutting-edge tech to protect you and the timeline,’ Osheen said, taking four

strips of bookmark-sized bendable metal out of his pocket, setting three of them in front of him, and holding the last one up. ‘Who wants first go?’

Theo’s hand shot up. Osheen handed him the strip, as well as a white single-piece uniform with far too many zips. After some whispered instructions between the two, Theo left the room giggling.

‘What’s he up to?’ asked Kez a minute or so later.

‘He’s putting on the uniform,’ said Osheen. ‘Something to help you integrate into the past more effectively.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Eureka, clearly baiting Osheen. ‘Dinosaurs were often seen wearing the full-body jumpsuit, complete with a blue hexagon pattern and a bunch of fiddly little components on it.’

‘There weren’t any dinosaurs where you’re going …’ mumbled Osheen, hook, line and sinker.

‘It’s not skin-tight is it?’ Jack asked. ‘Time travel is one thing, but chaffing is not something I’m signing up for.’

‘Disappointing buttock structure is it, Mr Braddock?’ said a new voice, striding into the room. A woman, tall and slender, with long, dark hair. She flicked her head around, the air barely contouring around her perfect features. ‘On your feet, all of you.’

Everyone stood, some saluted.

‘Mr Shupple,’ she snapped. ‘Do you mind explaining to me why there is a man in his underpants in the hall?’

‘Oh, that’s Theo,’ Osheen whimpered. ‘He’s trying on the—’

‘And you thought the best place for this was in the hall?’ the woman hissed. ‘Don’t try that nonsense with me, boy.’

‘Boy?’ mumbled Kez to herself. ‘Who is this?’

‘Something to say, Ms … ?’ said the woman, her eyes snapping onto Kez.

‘Kez,’ she said through a swallow. ‘Just Kez.’

‘Detention,’ the woman said, waving her hand at Kez as if to send the punishment her way. ‘See me afterwards.’

‘I … wha … ?’ stammered Kez.

‘Knock it off, you prick,’ Jack grunted, rolling his eyes at the woman. ‘You’ve terrified the poor lass.’

Kez realised that Osheen was barely suppressing his laughter, with bits of it escaping into the room like the sputtering of a mostly clogged sprinkler. The woman winked seductively at Jack.

‘Hello, sailor,’ she whispered, sultry as all hell.

With that she tapped her neck, causing the skin of her face to slide

away, up from the chin and over her head, until a completely new face was exposed. ‘How did you know it was me?’ Theo asked, still sporting his new, buxom body.

‘You walk at an angle,’ pointed Jack. ‘One leg is slightly longer than the other.’

‘What? I don’t …’

Theo tapped his neck again, causing the female form that shrouded him to fall away, revealing the skin-tight jumpsuit underneath.

‘Morag …’ he gasped, glancing down at his mismatched legs and trying very hard to suppress the smile forming from the sheer magnificence of her prank. ‘I can’t believe she got me *again*.’

‘These disguises,’ said Osheen, indicating the strip around the back of Theo’s neck, ‘work in tandem with the uniform to give you a complete disguise wherever you end up. They’re a combination of onboard nanobots, malleable projection sheeting, and voice modulation.’

Theo gazed down at his hands, which no longer had painted nails. He tapped his neck, half wanting to see if he could feel the projection sheeting running over his fingertips, and half because he thought he looked good in black nail polish. ‘Unbelievable,’ he said, admiring his fingers.

‘These disguises will be pre-programmed with your destinations and skim live data from any available sources in the area, giving you accurate and era-appropriate clothing, faces, and physical builds.’

‘Amazing tech,’ said Eureka, desperate to have a go with them.

‘Thank you,’ beamed Osheen. ‘I designed and built them myself right here on this very station.’

‘*Lucas*,’ smiled Jack.

‘Right …’ Osheen sighed. ‘*Lucas*.’

Time’s up, Bea said to Osheen. *We can’t keep Fatoumata any longer.*

‘Now, if you’ll all follow me,’ Osheen said, picking up the box he came in with. He beckoned everyone to leave the room. ‘We’re about to demonstrate the time machine to some interested parties.’

‘Wait, we’re starting today?!’ Jack exclaimed. ‘Now?!’

‘No, sorry,’ said Osheen, clearly flustered. ‘You’ll just be observing this time.’

He nodded and walked out of the room.

‘Well, that’s alright then,’ muttered Kez.

Osheen reappeared.

‘Observing from inside the machine itself,’ he corrected. ‘Show off

the new team, wear the uniforms, that sort of thing. You'll be fine.'

He left again. Half a second later he was back.

'Just don't touch the temporal focus point or you'll … uh …'

Osheen decided that now wasn't the right time to explain the existential horror of being a conduit for time itself. He instead smiled, gave a little thumbs up, and disappeared around the door again.

'Over–under on us surviving the next hour?' Jack mumbled on the way out.

'I wouldn't bet on us,' Kez replied grimly.

Chapter Fourteen

Crossing That Rubicon

LUCAS | 2783

Eyes closed, Fatoumata felt the air around them shift from warm and rusty to cold and clean. They gave themself a moment to acclimatise to the slightly different gravitational orientation and opened their eyes, revealing that they were in a control room, with an opaque shimmer blocking out the giant observation window that curved around them.

'Please take a seat,' said Alphonse as he loomed into Fatoumata's periphery to indicate a mismatched collection of chairs on a slightly elevated platform at the back of the curved room. 'We shall begin shortly.'

Fatoumata obliged and selected a chair right at the front and centre. Moments later, Baxter appeared in the room and made his way to the chair next to her.

'Bloody kibble munchers,' he growled. 'I'm going to go grey early thanks to Pearl and her lot.'

Fatoumata glanced down at Baxter, his already grey coat in desperate need of a grooming. They raised an eyebrow.

'Greyer then,' he said, before deciding he was frightened of the office chair he was on, and hopping over to one that wasn't quite as spinny. Another crack indicated the arrival of a group that Fatoumata hadn't met yet. A handful of old, bearded men, all of whom were wearing white coats.

'Who are they?' Fatoumata whispered to Baxter, flicking their eyes towards the group. Baxter gave them a once over with his NPC and reported back.

'Notable scientists in the field of time travel,' he barked. 'I assume Osheen has gathered them all here today to gloat.'

Classic Osheen, smiled Fatoumata. *The absolute dick.* Thinking of the devil, Osheen and Bea suddenly appeared at the front of the room. The lights dimmed, a spotlight hit them, and behind Fatoumata, the old men struggled to find their seats in the dark.

'Welcome,' said Osheen, holding his arms out, 'to the first working time machine in the galaxy!'

As he spoke, the opaque shimmer fell from the window, revealing a crystal sphere, sparkling in the darkness behind him. With dramatic clunks, several lights came on, illuminating the sphere. Fatoumata noticed that several of the lights failed to turn on, but politely clapped along with the rest of the group, then gasped as they caught a glimpse of the massive swirling black hole above them all.

'Almost seventy years ago, the Affinity first came into contact with the Clive,' said Osheen, raising a hand towards Clive who was sitting to the side, picking his nose at the time. 'And with that contact brought the greatest secret that only a select few on Earth currently know. A message from before our own history.'

The message played, booming over the speaker system with some foreboding, yet carefully measured, classical music underscoring it.

'Thirty years later, we launched Project Novus. A faster-than-light satellite, launched from the Clive homeworld, with the capability to detect and record any signals from two and a half million years of history, right up to the present day. Five years later, it arrived at Earth … and it had one hell of a story to tell.'

Osheen paced the room slowly, back and forth, turning as he made a point, nailing everything he'd speed-read last night in that book on public speaking.

'Not only did we get the clearest recording of the signal to date, but we found something else. Codes. Precise numerical strings, broadcast by a device that contained a digital signature.' Bea's holographic display lit up the space between Osheen and his audience. A bit kitsch, but he always liked the physical presence they had in a room. 'That signature was *mine*. In confirming the Clive's findings, we've accidentally revealed multiple points in the past where a visitation might be possible without the risk of temporal paradoxes.'

Step, two, three, four, hip turn, power stance.

'So, all I had to do next was invent the time machine. Simple, right?'

A deftly raised eyebrow nudged the audience into warm tittering.

'After ten years, working with some of the finest minds in the galaxy, we built this. The time machine. Capable of sending a four-man crew into the past, to any time between today and two point five million years ago, not only to solve the oldest mystery of our planet, but to eventually give us an unparalleled look at history itself. Who built Stonehenge? What caused the London Blast? Did the Hanging Gardens of Babylon exist? This machine can and will give us answers.'

At this point, an incredible space fireworks display would have lit up

the audience's smiling faces. However, as this was put together overnight, Osheen made do with a single, burning escape pod, jettisoned into the black hole. On the other side of the control room, hidden in the darkness, Malcolm was frantically countering the damage of this launch to the station's orbit.

'Now, let's meet our crew!' Osheen took a few steps to the side as Bea's holograms faded away. He really hoped everyone had their new uniform on by now.

'First up we have an up-and-coming talent in the field of temporal physics, who recently graduated at the top of her class. Kezia …'

Surname, Osheen snapped at Bea internally.

She doesn't have one, Bea replied.

Who doesn't have a last name!?

'Kezia!' finished Osheen.

'Kezia Kezia?' rasped an old man behind Fatoumata as Kez suddenly appeared, bewildered, in the launch sphere, wearing a new uniform designed to work in tandem with the currently inactive disguise strip on the back of her neck. She shouted something about consent before teleporting, but all the nothing between the sphere and the command centre silenced that particular thought.

'Second, a world-famous archaeologist, renowned all the galaxy over …'

I can't say Jack Braddock, thought Osheen as he spoke. *They'll shut me down immediately.*

Just go with first names, replied Bea. *Kez has teed you up for it.*

Good spot, Osheen replied.

'Jack!' said Osheen, as Jack appeared in the launch sphere. He waved sheepishly, tried to put his hands in pockets that weren't there, and spent the next few moments desperately trying to pull out of a blush.

'Our next time traveller, and the leader of this group, is a maverick. Bold, decisive and …' Osheen stumbled, his eyes ahead of him on the prompter, 'a total maverick.'

Repetition of maverick, Bea buzzed.

I wrote this in an hour, give me a break.

'Theo Garnett!' Osheen said, clapping for some reason.

Surname?

Shit!

Theo burst into existence in the sphere, bowing deeply, before deciding that Kez and Jack were in a line-up and joining them. 'And

finally,' said Osheen, excited about the legitimacy that this name was about to give his project, 'I give you a woman that needs no introduction … Eureka!'

With a flourish, Osheen waved his arms at the time machine, expecting gasps, not the confused silence that filled the room.

Surname!

Shit!

'… Shine,' he added with a small cough. 'Eureka Shine. *The* Eureka Shine.'

Eureka appeared inside the time machine, just as she pulled the last zipper up on the arm of her new uniform. She noticed that everyone else was in a line and quickly joined, unsure about where exactly to put her hands. Fatoumata's jaw dropped. They leapt from their chair and quickly stepped up to the window of the command room, almost pressing themselves against it. Baxter joined them, paws on the glass, tail uncharacteristically still.

'How … ?' Fatoumata whispered.

'Long story,' Osheen said, peeling Fatoumata and Baxter from the glass and inviting them to return to their seats. 'Actually, before we carry on I have something here for you, Fatou.'

Osheen reached behind a console and pulled out a small, wooden box. Very carefully he slid off its lid and withdrew a pendant from inside. He held it up, where a well-placed spotlight caught its absolutely perfect spherical form with a glint.

'Look familiar?' He asked.

Fatoumata gasped and instinctively checked on their own necklace. It was still there. 'A copy?' they asked as Osheen brought it over to them.

'You should check,' he smiled.

Fatoumata, like all eight members of the Affinity's highest council, was not equipped with an NPC for security reasons. Therefore, Baxter trotted forward to do the work. After he'd performed several deep mineral composition and structure scans, he nodded gruffly. This wasn't a copy. This was the pendant that was still around Fatoumata's own neck.

'Trade?' asked Osheen, smiling slightly to let them know that it was OK. Fatoumata complied, swapping the necklaces over. It felt identical on their neck, including the slightly janky anti-gravity field on the left hand side. 'Now,' said Osheen, producing another wooden box from behind the console and setting it next to the first. 'We're going to send

this pendant back in time thirty minutes. I'll pick it up then, bring it here, and trade it with you for yours.'

Fatoumata clutched the pendant again, part of them still not believing this was even possible. Osheen placed the pendant in the box, removed the discreet sticky note on it so he didn't accidentally send the wrong box back, and pressed a button. With a snap, the box vanished from the control room, and appeared on the floor of the time machine itself. The gang inside looked at each other nervously and took a small step back.

Osheen lifted a small protective cap from what he correctly thought was a really cool-looking red button. He pressed it, sending a jolt of electricity rushing across a wire. This wire ran to the other side of the command room and lit up a small green light where Malcolm was waiting. Malcolm then activated the time machine, which powered up, fired successfully, and tore a bloody great hole into the universe.

'Ah,' Osheen said. 'I should probably fix that.'

'HOLD ON,' Theo yelled over the noise, one hand wrapped around a bundle of cables, the other holding onto Eureka's hand as they dangled sideways towards the rift.

'WHAT IS THAT THING?!' Jack shouted, both hands clinging desperately to a small gap between floor panels, years of archaeology roughing up his hands finally paying off. 'IS THIS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN?'

'I DON'T THINK SO,' Kez yelled back, her hair going absolutely apeshit in this muddled gravity. 'OSHEEN LOOKS TERRIFIED.'

Eureka glanced down, across the time machine's floor, past the widening crack in reality that just swallowed the small wooden box, and could just about see Osheen frantically tossing cables about like a man fending off aggressive snakes. The group of scientists had gotten to their feet and were watching the chaos unfold. Even Fatoumata had their sleeves rolled up.

'MATTER COURIERS AREN'T WORKING,' Theo yelled, flinging commands across his NPC. 'THEY CAN'T FUNCTION WHEN THE MACHINE IS LIVE.'

'WE CAN'T TELEPORT OUT?' Jack asked as some of Theo's nanobots crawled over his hand, adding support. 'WHO DESIGNED THIS FUCKING THING?'

‘IS THAT A BLACK HOLE?’ Kez asked, pointing at the swirling mass in front of her. Unfortunately for her, the motion of the point was too much for the nanobots that were rooting her arm to the ground. With a barely audible snap, they gave way, leaving her falling sideways towards the void. She grasped for something, anything to stop her fall, but all her fingers met was smooth, polished metal. A panicked foot kicked out, hitting the floor painfully and sending her into a spin. As she fell past the glowing sphere, metres away from the rift, she caught sight of Osheen. He was laughing.

With a flash of blinding light, Kez fell out of the universe.

Throughout her life, Kez thought she had understood the concept of darkness. She’d learned that it was nothing more than the absence of light, and until today, that fact had never been contested. But now, as she unscrunched a single eye, she gazed upon an entirely new type of darkness. One that was very much a thing in its own right.

She gasped for a breath, but her lungs ignored the request, happy to take some much needed R&R after twenty-three years without so much as an afternoon off. Kez might have found their inaction slightly more problematic had her heart been beating, which it currently wasn’t. None of that mattered though, because she had started to become aware of the thing that was standing behind her. She could feel it staring at her, even though it was grotesquely far away. She pivoted, or at least attempted to, her hands cupping at the darkness, but the thing remained behind her, locked in place. Watching her. Terrified.

Suddenly, a wave of energy jolted through the darkness, sweeping Kez away from this place, and leaving the monster alone once more.

Kez fell out of the rift in the exact same position she had entered it, just without any of the momentum. One moment she was in the air, the next she had collided with hard ground, arse first.

You alright out there? E-NA asked.

Kez didn’t have time to reply as Eureka, Jack, and Theo all appeared above her, in a position that clearly was the result of a mid-air collision. She rolled out of the way, just in time to give them all a much harder landing.

‘Everyone alive?’ a winded Theo groaned. The group groaned back.

‘Was that how the machine was supposed to work?’ asked Eureka, deciding that lying on the floor was much more comfortable than standing at this moment.

‘I hope not,’ said Theo, climbing to his feet and offering a hand to the others. ‘These uniforms will need way more padding.’

‘Anyone know where we are?’ Jack asked, refusing Theo’s offer of help. Kez knew where they were. Unlike everyone else, she’d been conscious enough to see this room properly.

‘We’re still on *Lucas*,’ she said, slightly unimpressed. ‘The matter courier room.’

‘It was a trick,’ mumbled Jack, ‘the whole thing. I knew he was a shyster.’

‘He was laughing when we fell in,’ said Kez. ‘Anyone else see that?’

‘I saw a big room, a fancy orb we’re not allowed to touch, and a box,’ Jack said, counting each thing off on a finger. ‘Then, the universe did yoga for a bit and now I’m here. So, no, I didn’t see anyone, laughing or not.’

‘Huh …’ said Kez and Theo simultaneously.

‘Huh?’ asked Eureka.

‘I’ve been logged out of the Interlink,’ said Kez, as E-NA repeatedly turned the connection off and on again.

‘Cannot connect: ID already in use,’ read Theo. ‘What’s that about?’

Eureka looked at Jack, who nodded in agreement, despite the fact that his NPC had been deactivated before his prison sentence and not yet reinstated. He was about as connected to the outside world as a dead hermit.

The room suddenly lit up with the familiar warning jingle of an oncoming teleport, as a small green light indicated that the only platform was ready to accept an arrival. While teleporting could largely be done from anywhere, jumping from pad to pad was safer, often faster, and far less likely to embed you in the wall or a family friend.

‘Here he comes,’ said Jack, cracking his knuckles and stepping up onto the platform, the tips of his boots only just behind the safety line. ‘I’m very excited to deck this arsehole right in his ugly—’

Spacetime folded, dumping the traveller in front of Jack. It was a man he had seen before, but never quite like this.

‘My word,’ said Theo, joining Jack on the platform. ‘That *is* an ugly face.’

‘Monstrous,’ agreed Kez.

‘Vile,’ added Eureka.

‘OK,’ said Jack, staring into his own, frozen eyes. ‘Maybe not a shyster after all.’

‘This was earlier today,’ said Kez, her eyes flicking between the two Jacks. ‘I saw him exactly like this before.’

‘We should hide then,’ said Theo.

‘Why?’ Jack said, as Theo interrupted his staring contest with himself to drag him behind a stack of metal canisters.

‘Because Kez would have mentioned meeting two of you in one go,’ Eureka said, crouching behind a box that, from the smell, something was possibly dead in. The matter courier platform sounded again, slightly complained that there was an obstacle on the platform, then dumped the second traveller of the day in front of Jack. She took one look around the place and wrinkled her nose.

‘What a shithole,’ she summarised embarrassingly. Behind some crates, her future self cringed.

So, said Theo, starting an internal group chat between everyone’s NPCs and ECs, w*e have actually travelled in time.*

How the fuck do you talk in this fucking thing, Eureka said, untrained in conversational thought.[fn31] *No one has explained a fucking thing. My knees fucking hurt. I really need to pis—*

Theo muted Eureka’s thoughts from the chat, just as the air around them lit up with a string of expletives from over the crates. Kez briefly considered strangling her past self.

You didn’t check behind these crates or anything like that? Theo asked Kez. *We’re safe here?*

Kez nodded. *Osheen is about to appear,* she explained. *He wakes Jack up, and then we leave together. After that, Osheen is alone.*

Fantastic, said Theo*, we’ll confront him then, OK?*

Kez, Theo, and Eureka nodded at each other, then looked over at Jack. He shrugged and mouthed back, ‘what?’

Later, as older versions of Kez and Jack headed off to a baffling meeting, Osheen leaned his forehead against the door, mentally checking another bullet point off his to-do list.

‘What’s next?’ he asked Bea.

‘Brief the team, convince them to travel in an almost definitely dangerous time machine, and lie to the highest-ranking human that

we're in complete control of the situation.'

The fuck did she just say? Kez asked. *They knew it was dangerous?*

The highest-ranking human? Theo wondered. *It can't be.*

Eureka replied, explaining in incredible detail what she thought the situation was, still unaware she was muted.

Look! Kez said, pointing above the matter courier at a space that wasn't there anymore. *That's no ordinary teleport.*

Moments later, a familiar wooden box fell onto the matter courier, spat out of its own time. Osheen noticed it and, after a security scan from Bea gave him the all-clear, he picked it up.

'Right, here we go,' said Jack, leaving his hiding place and ignoring the whispered objections of his peers.

'Oh,' Osheen murmured at the open box. 'I hope this never gets old.'

'*You* might not,' grunted Jack, throwing his weight behind his fist. Bea spotted the incoming attack and flew into the way, deflecting the blow at the cost of her own structural integrity. She crashed to the ground, an endless stream of warnings and error messages appearing in Osheen's vision.

'BEA!' Osheen exclaimed, scrambling for her as she bounced off a wall, rolled across the floor, and stopped under the toes of Jack's waiting boot.

'Talk,' Jack growled. 'Now.'

Osheen looked up at the group that was emerging from behind the crates. Two he'd met yesterday, two he'd met moments ago. All of them in uniforms he'd not given them yet.

'Incredible,' he gasped, the fear in his eyes being replaced by an inquisitive joy. 'You've travelled already?'

'Looks that way, don't it?' said Jack. 'Now, before I shatter your friend's difficult-to-replace shell, answer me this. Why did you pick the four of us?'

'We were sent instructions,' Osheen said. 'Your names, locations, and meeting times.'

'OK,' said Jack slowly, surprised the answers were as forthcoming as they were. 'Who sent these instructions?'

'I did!' said Osheen. Bea's frame made an ominous cracking sound.

'Jack …' said Theo, placing a hand on his shoulder. Jack shrugged it off, his attention unwavering.

'I recommend you only stop talking when you're done explaining,' he said.

'You're here because of a paradox,' Osheen said quickly. 'Yesterday

we received your names from a note we sent today. We only knew your names in the first place because of the note. It's a loop in time. Information without an origin.'

Jack sighed, kicking himself for not expecting the answer to be some bullshit like this. He lifted his foot from Bea, apologising to her quietly as she floated back over to Osheen and began repairing her frame with the aid of some nearby nanobots, and deleting Jack's name from her Christmas card list.

'What you're saying is that the universe plucked our names out of its arse,' Theo said. 'How does that work?'

'It's difficult to explain, but thankfully we've someone on board who specialised in this,' Osheen said, offering the floor up. 'Kez, you want to take this one?'

Kez, having just achieved the world record for 'fastest appearance of a stomach ache', frantically searched her mind for something, anything that she was supposed to actually know.

'Uh … Einstein theorised—' she began weakly, before Osheen mercifully cut her off.

'If we start at special relativity, we'll be here all day,' he said. 'We all know that the propagation of a photon in a vacuum is an event with zero influence in the quantum field, with regard to temporal interference, right?'

Nothing. Kez tried a knowledgeable face, but worried she may have hit closer to the look of someone currently undergoing brain-freeze.

'*Einstein theorised*,' Osheen restarted through gritted teeth, 'that as an object reaches the speed of light, time itself contracts down to nothing.'

A few half-hearted nods. Better than nothing. Osheen continued. 'If you see a star in the night sky, although the photons from it that collide with your eye have travelled for billions of miles, for the light itself no time has passed.' Fewer nods. 'So *we* perceive time, but *the universe* might not. If that's the case then, as long as events occur, their order doesn't matter. The universe just happens in one great big go.'

No nods. Many confused glances. Theo scratched his head. 'So the universe *did* pull us out of its arse?'

'Basically, yes,' nodded Osheen. 'It knew where you all were, because if you weren't there, why would I send the note back? The information had to be correct for the event to occur in the first place. Everything about this was inevitable.'

Jack thought about screaming and decided against it at the last

second.

'Then what does this say about free will?' asked Kez suddenly. Osheen blinked.

'Huh?'

'If our destinations are pre-determined, and your hiring process sees to that, then our choices are meaningless,' Kez shrugged. 'We have no free will.'

All eyes turned towards Osheen, except for Osheen's, which turned towards the floor.

'Well …' he began and ended. Nothing came to him. Nothing could.

'Where was this argument during my court case?' Jack grumbled. 'It's not my fault, your honour, I don't actually have free will.'

'So what if we go back and kill Hitler as a baby?' Eureka asked. 'What happens then?'

'You could kill a baby?' asked Osheen.

'So what if we go back and kill Hitler as a teenager?' Eureka asked. 'What happens then?'

'A paradox *within* a paradox doesn't sound like a good thing,' agreed Theo, shifting uncomfortably.

'A paradox paradox,' nodded Kez, desperate to sound cool and knowledgeable, but internally kicking herself for coming up with such a stupid, stupid name.

Osheen gave a tiny shrug. 'Well, that's a causal infraction,' he muttered. 'From what I understand, either time itself will collapse, or you'd be replaced the moment you broke causality.'

Eureka took this one. 'Replaced?'

'Erased from existence,' Osheen explained to the patch of floor under his feet. 'With someone else taking your place in the universe.'

Theo started to laugh a little too hard. 'What you're saying is that your time machine is designed, at the detriment of the people in this room, to *protect Hitler*?'

Osheen nodded, before suddenly realising which direction the conversation was heading in.

'No! Well, yes … but only because that's a pre-established event that —'

Jack held up a particularly threatening finger. 'So there are two possibilities here. Either we don't have free will, or we do, but if we stray off the path of pre-determinism, then we'll be surgically cut from time.'

Osheen nodded weakly.

‘I wish you’d told us this before,’ Jack said, severe menace in the undertones of his calmness. ‘I would have told you to shove that time machine so far up your arse that you’d regurgitate it.’

‘Before?’ Osheen asked.

‘I think he means the first briefing with them,’ Bea buzzed. ‘The one you are now late for.’

‘Am I? Bugger,’ said Osheen, checking he had everything he needed before turning back to Jack. ‘Funnily enough, I actually was going to talk about all of this in that briefing, but now I know that I didn’t, I can’t!’

With that he headed for the exit, the swishing of the door as it opened the only sound in the room.

‘Wait here,’ he called back as he and Bea departed. ‘I’ll be with you after I’ve had the meeting you’ve already had.’

With that, the door slid closed, leaving the group confused, angry, and alone.

‘I fucking hate sci-fi,’ Jack growled.

‘Osheen?’ said Fatoumata, pointing into the time machine behind him. ‘Is that supposed to be happening?’

Osheen whipped around. The bolt of light that had struck the paper was still there, hovering in the time machine, and it was growing. No, not growing. Everything around it was shrinking. Spacetime was folding into itself like a pretzel baked by MC Escher. At the far end of the time machine, his would-be travellers were holding onto the floor for dear life, as some unseen force pulled them towards the rift.

‘Ah,’ Osheen said, ‘I should probably fix that.’

Bea took on the role of crowd control as Malcolm whizzed around the command room, pulling up next to Osheen and folding into wild, sharp shapes.

‘Power overload,’ Malcolm said. ‘I am unable to shut off the turbines.’

Osheen glanced over at the group of old men in the back of the room. One of them gave him a cheery thumbs up.

‘Not to worry, folks,’ Bea chirped to the group as they watched a time machine fold in on itself. ‘Everything’s fine.’

A wall panel exploded nearby, sending sparks cascading over the group, as a deep rumble began to fill the room. Baxter started to bark

at nothing in particular.

Should I get them out of here? Bea asked Osheen. *Only I think killing one of the leaders of the free galaxy wouldn't be the best look for us. You know, career wise.*

'Impossible!' Osheen yelled, ignoring internal comms to think as he ducked under a terminal, ripped a panel up from the floor, and started fighting a mass of wires. 'We can't teleport in or out when the machine is active, and I'm currently diverting as much spare energy as I can into the walkways.'

'We could eject the blades,' Malcolm said. 'That would cut the power off in an instant.'

'Might not work,' Osheen replied. 'If we do that and the machine doesn't deactivate properly, who knows if the rift will close on its own.'

'What's the problem?' asked Fatoumata, leaning over a terminal. Osheen looked up at his old friend as another panel blew. The correct social decorum at this point was to tell them that there was nothing to worry about, and that they could sit down. Fuck that, he had a room full of people to not explode.

'We've got a capacitance overload in the majority of the supports,' he said, trying not to talk too fast as he didn't have time to repeat. 'In a few minutes, either everything explodes, or the supports melt and we fall into the black hole.'

Fatoumata smiled. It was only a flash, but a definite grin crossed their lips. 'Anything I can do?' they asked, tying their hair back with some cabling that had lost its bout with Osheen.

'Behind you, panel IB-9,' Osheen said, rooting around in a pocket for a tiny tool he could have sworn was in there. 'Pull it up and reroute every power subroutine you can. The structural integrity subroutines should—'

Osheen's readouts indicated that the circuitry above Fatoumata was about to give up the ghost in an explosive manner. At a speed defying his age he leapt to his feet, his left hand snatching up a loose panel, his right pulling Fatoumata in close by their waist. The electronics gave way as Osheen held the panel above them, shielding them both from the cascading white-hot sparks, yet doing nothing to prevent the ancient ones rekindling between them.

'Nice to see you can still move like a young man,' Fatoumata said, watching their old friend come alive again in front of their eyes.

'The implication there is that I'm old,' Osheen grinned. 'I don't like

that.'

'I do,' winked Fatoumata.

For a tiny moment, Osheen got lost in the fire of his old friend's eyes, letting the moment linger a little too long for two people who were not that far away from a dying time machine. Then a real fire broke out, separating the pair.

'Why are the capacitors overloading?' Fatoumata asked, recomposing themself and heading over to panel IB-9.

'The last rift didn't close properly,' Osheen said, taking on extinguishing duty. 'This machine is designed to send people back in time, then recall them to the present. So far we've only sent things back.'

'I'm surprised you overlooked this,' tutted one of the old scientists as the group doddered over.

'Amateur hour, Osheen,' said another. 'Amateur hour.'

'To think we let you into our chess club,' said a third.

Osheen laughed, the comment catching him off guard.

'Have you lot *ever* met a scientist before?' he chuckled. 'Who would be interested in a club for a solved game?'

A blinding light flashed in the time machine. Kez had fallen into the rift.

'Whoops,' said the last scientist. 'There you go.'

'At least they didn't scream,' replied the third.

'Osheen,' said Fatoumata. 'What is happening? Who are these people?'

Osheen pointed into the time machine, where the rest of the group was seconds away from falling in.

'These four people are those four people,' he said. 'Turns out our clocks weren't the only thing out of sync.'

Fatoumata glanced between the two groups, confusion joining the oil and dirt on their face.

'We're about to time travel,' said Theo, his voice creaking with artificial age. 'Back to earlier today.'

'But, you don't look …' began Fatoumata.

'Disguise protocol,' yelled Osheen, his voice echoing from inside a wall panel. 'The schematics were in the planning report I submitted.'

'Do you think I remember all of the details from a several-hundred-page report I read over a decade ago?' Fatoumata asked, fusing several wires together.

Osheen's head emerged from the wall.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘You’re a dork.’

‘That’s not—’

‘Not only a dork, but one who values their attention to detail so much that they know what I’m talking about and will have to admit as much, even in the face of being called a dork.’

Fatoumata tapped a foot impatiently, waiting for the school-playground level of insults to die down. ‘I am not a dork,’ they said.

Osheen waited. Fatoumata wasn’t budging.

Osheen waited some more.

‘Metal strips around the back of the neck,’ Fatoumata pouted. ‘Onboard nanobots. Projection sheeting. Voice modulation. I am not a dork.’

‘Yeah, you are,’ said Osheen, yanking a panel off a wall and revealing a large red lever with about twelve warning labels around it. ‘Malcom, we good to go?’

Malcolm whizzed by at high speed, muttering something to himself. Inside the time machine, Jack’s grip gave out. He screamed silently as his flailing legs kicked away Theo’s hand, sending all three of them into the rift.

‘THAT’LL DO!’ Osheen yelled. He strained against the lever, both feet on the wall to add torque until, with an almighty clunk, it came crashing down, sending Osheen to the floor, filling the time machine with brilliant light, and flooding the rest of the station in absolute darkness. On the other side of *Lucas*, Clive almost concussed himself on an open cupboard door.

Osheen ran over to the time machine, his hands and head pressed against one of the panes of glass separating them. The lights flickered back on.

‘Yes!’ he yelled, hammering his fists against the glass at the sight of the empty time machine. ‘Loop resolved! Rift closed! We did it!’

Osheen pivoted on the spot, smiling like the cat that got an entire creamery, only to be met with scowling faces, a ruined control room, and the smell of singed hair, both head and otherwise. He nodded slowly.

‘You’re right. Let’s talk.’

‘Congratulations, all!’ boomed Alphonse as the smouldering group entered his cafeteria. ‘In you come! For those of you who don’t know,

I'm Alphonse, head of security and a dab hand in the kitchen. For those of you who do know, the information remains unchanged.'

With a trademark belly laugh he proceeded to shake hands with the entire group, before stopping in front of Eureka, who wasn't sure which to be stunned by first: the colossal alien in front of her, or the entire Milky Way galaxy, perfectly framed by the windows along the wall.

'An honour,' Alphonse said, bowing deeply. Eureka watched, fascinated, as the lava that made up his being swirled around inside its transparent shell.

'You're a … Besalt, right?' Eureka asked, hoping Theo hadn't set her up with dodgy information.

'What gave it away?' Alphonse chuckled. 'My good looks? My winning personality? The fact I weigh half a tonne?'

'Only half a tonne?' exclaimed Theo, taking a seat in the largest booth available. 'Bloody hell, compression technology has come a way since I last read about it.'

'Experimental tech,' said Alphonse, crossing his massive arms across an equally massive chest. 'I'm the largest guinea pig in the galaxy!'

And the whiniest, Bea mumbled to Osheen as the two of them tittered quietly.

'Compression technology?' asked Eureka. 'You're being shrunk down?'

'Yeah, well, we're a bit bigger than most other species in the Affinity,' Alphonse replied, desperately trying to sound laid-back in front of Eureka. 'To make life easier, we shrink down a bit so we can, you know, fit through doors, that sort of thing. Sure, our bodies become superheated, but we can deal with the side effects. We're a tough bunch.'

Without warning, Alphonse gave a little toot of steam from the vent at the top of his head. 'Excuse me,' he muttered, embarrassed.

'You know my next question,' said Eureka, absolutely loving this.

Alphonse boomed with laughter, each expulsion of air shaking the floor like a mortar round. 'Without my compression shell I am about seven kilometres tall.'

'Fuck off!' laughed Eureka. 'You're kidding!'

'That's …' began Theo.

'Kinda small, huh?' said Alphonse, slightly sheepishly. 'Genetics man. Dad was nine kilometres, Mum was eleven. Some great-great-granddad somewhere was four. What a git.'

A small chime rang out from behind the shutters. Alphonse bowed deeply and hastily made his way towards the kitchen.

'You know, he gave up an incredible captaincy to be here,' Osheen said, watching him go as everyone else took their seats. 'The only downside with him is that the compression technology increases his mass to a point where time slows down slightly when you're near him. Or maybe it just feels like that sometimes. He does like to go on about food …'

Osheen turned back to the table and jumped slightly when he noticed that everyone was staring at him intensely and, in some cases, angrily.

'Any questions?' he offered.

Fatoumata pointed at Eureka. 'The real Eureka Shine?'

'Hello!' said Eureka, reaching across the table for a handshake. 'Lovely to meet you.'

'It'll all be in my logs,' Osheen said, as Fatoumata's mouth showed no sign of closing anytime soon. 'Anyone else?'

'So, are we the first then?' Kez asked. 'The Neil …'

Buchanan, E-NA offered, praying she went for it.

'The Neil Buchanan of time travel?' Kez concluded as E-NA backed up a recording of this moment several times.

'Got you beat,' laughed Eureka, flicking a rude hand gesture Kez's way. 'Some of us time travelled before it was cool.'

'Do I know you?' Fatoumata asked Kez, tilting their head as they spoke. 'You look familiar …'

'Me?' asked Kez, taken aback. 'Probably not.'

'Are time loops and other shenanigans going to be that common?' asked Jack. 'I barely followed that one.'

'We should be in control from now on,' replied Osheen. 'Nobody has met a future version of themselves recently have they?'

'Harker!' Fatoumata said, clapping their hands and pointing at Kez, who suddenly felt as though she had dropped several floors without warning. 'You must be Harker's girl!'

'You knew my mum?' she asked, slipping her hands under the table to hide how much they had started shaking.

'She worked very closely with me during some …' Fatoumata stopped briefly to acknowledge the confidentiality reminders that Baxter was glaring their way. '… delicate operations.'

Kez nodded at the table, all eye contact abandoned as she and years of therapy tried to get her breathing back under control.

‘Nachos!’ announced Alphonse, appearing from the kitchen doors with an immense amount of tortilla chips, cheese, and multicoloured dips resting on a tray. ‘Mind your fingers.’

Everyone leaned back as a tennis court’s worth of food came crashing down in front of them. Kez stared at a bowl of guacamole, absorbing its details, grounding herself in the universe.

‘*Buen provecho!*’[fn32] said Alphonse, beaming away as the room began to dig in.

‘I never had the pleasure of meeting Harker,’ Baxter barked in between chomps. ‘Fatoumata speaks very highly of her. What, may I ask, is she up to …’

Kez hyper-focused on the green paste as Baxter spoke. The way the light hit it. The smell of avocados emanating from it. Her breathing steadied. The work paid off. ‘She’s gone,’ muttered Kez. ‘A long time ago now.’

‘Oh, Kezia,’ said Osheen. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I lost my dad just before I graduated,’ said Eureka, traversing the common ground. ‘He never knew that I passed, or that Lily and I ever got together. It’s the worst.’

‘I don’t know if she’s alive or not,’ said Kez, refocusing on the breathing, not the anger. ‘She vanished during a classified mission.’

A slow breath rose up over the emotion, enveloped it, dissolved it. ‘Like I said, a long time ago now.’

Silence joined the group at the table and began loading up a heavy plate. It got around to seconds before Fatoumata spoke.

‘When this mission is over, and if you wish to, you and I will sit down and find out exactly what happened to Harker,’ they said, a caring hand on Kez’s shoulder. ‘We’ll right this wrong.’

Kez stopped. She wasn’t doing anything, and she still stopped.

Holy shit, whispered E-NA. *We’ll finally know.*

‘Thank you,’ Kez whispered, using facial muscles she didn’t know she had to hold back tears. ‘I’d like that very much.’

Fatoumata smiled, concluding the conversation and leaving the group with nothing but the sounds of sizzling cheese between them.

‘Come on then,’ Kez laughed in a further attempt to suppress tears. ‘I can’t be the only one with a sob story.’

For a moment, nothing. A group of people, unsure of each other, flanking some fried corn. With the soft rustle of a lab coat, Osheen raised his hand.

‘Dead wife,’ he said.

‘Difficult childhood,’ nodded Alphonse a moment later.

‘My wife lives hundreds of years away,’ chuckled Eureka.

‘Chocolate addiction,’ barked Baxter.

‘You know mine,’ sighed Jack.

‘Dodgy circuitry,’ said Bea, bumping into Osheen.

‘People don’t even realise I’m in the room,’ said Clive.

‘No original parts,’ said Theo, with a weak smile.

‘Some bastards started eating without me,’ said Morag, her mechanical limbs striding her over to a table that had fallen about laughing. With a swipe of an arm, several tortilla chips had been snatched, crushed, and were now floating about in her vat, making her look like the oddest snow globe in existence.

‘And on that note,’ said Fatoumata, getting to their feet as Baxter leapt down off the table to follow them, ‘I can see that time is in capable hands. I’m off to go and manage space.’

Fatoumata nodded to Baxter. Moments later all of the cutlery on the table clattered as a heavy vibration shook the station. Outside, floating aggressively close, with the Milky Way forming a halo behind it, was the *Omphalos*, Fatoumata’s Homeship. Everyone in the cafeteria flung themselves at the windows to gawp at it.

Where most Homeships look like a small version of the occupants’ homeworld, Fatoumata’s looked like a giant, spherical bathroom window. A crystalline barrier, as thick as its structure was top secret, shrouded all but the outermost layers of the *Omphalos*. Beneath that, barely glimpsable, huge swarms of nanobots drifted past like submerged sharks, ready to do whatever was necessary to protect not just this ship, but the entire fleet it could be leading into battle. The rumours were that this ship could commit absolute ecophagy to any planet that posed a threat, but those were just rumours. In reality, it was far, far more powerful.

‘That’s my ride,’ said Fatoumata to the back of people’s heads.

‘Thank you for coming,’ said Osheen, just about able to tear his vision from the ship outside the window. ‘It was an honour to have you here.’

‘Anytime, old friend,’ Fatoumata smiled. ‘I’d love to stay, but Betelgeuse is still a top priority. We need to find out exactly what happened.’

‘Plofbare experiments still not bearing fruit?’

Fatoumata shook their head.

‘If there’s anything I can do—’ Osheen said, before Fatoumata

stopped him with a look.

'Save the universe,' they smiled. 'Then worry about me.'

'I'll send you a message the second we hear anything,' Osheen said, embracing Fatoumata.

'Be safe,' they replied, squeezing back.

After a time, they released. Hands ran down arms and lingered slightly as they brushed past their opposite.

'One thing before you go,' Osheen said, his eyes slightly sadder than usual.

'Hmm?'

'You didn't come by ship, but you're leaving by it,' he said as he jerked his thumb at the *Omphalos*, hovering monstrously outside the window. 'Did you not bring it here initially because you were worried that I might fuck up and destroy it?'

Fatoumata laughed, shrugged, kissed Osheen on the forehead, and vanished along with Baxter. A few seconds later, the *Omphalos* vanished as well, leaving about a million light years of free space between the windows and the next object of interest.

'They used to copy my homework you know,' Osheen said, staring at the space where Fatoumata had stood moments ago.

'You two got history?' asked Theo.

'When you get to be as old as me, all you'll have is history,' Osheen sighed. He then noticed a blob of salsa on his lab coat and sighed again. He'd not even eaten anything. 'Any last questions before we all head to bed? We've got a busy day tomorrow.'

'What's tomorrow?' asked Jack.

'Time travel!' said Osheen. 'What else?'

'Tomorrow!?' exclaimed the majority of the room.

'The machine works,' shrugged Osheen. 'Why not?'

'Working is one thing,' said Jack. 'Working safely is another.'

'Kinks! That's all it is …' said Osheen.

'Kinks don't usually punch a hole in the universe,' replied Jack.

'Depends what you're into,' giggled Morag.

A limit was hit. A fist hit the table.

'Would somebody *please* take this seriously,' Jack yelled. 'Anybody?!'

Silently, Morag withdrew a medical scanner from her toolbelt and started to scan Jack from under the table. His amygdala was going berserk, overriding the frontal lobes and taking complete control of his stress response. Also, he had a slight infection in his sinuses, but Morag decided, quite rightly, that that wasn't important.

‘Jack—’ Osheen said, before another spike of emotions overrode Jack’s logical thought processes.

‘You are going to kill these people, and they all seem too stupid to realise it,’ Jack spat. ‘I’m getting out while I still exist.’

‘We will fix the problems—’

‘Problems?’ Jack laughed. ‘I watched myself fall into a hole in the fucking universe! The fucking leader of Earth was standing next to me, and I was disguised as an old friend of yours at the time. These aren’t problems, these are events orchestrated by a madman!’

‘Jack—’ Osheen began, before Jack grabbed him firmly by the hand, shook it, and threw it back at him.

‘I’m out.’

With that, Jack strode out of the room with such a speed that the automatic doors only just managed to open in time. As they slid shut, Osheen sighed for the third time in as many minutes, looking every bit of his age.

‘I’ll go have a word with him,’ Kez said softly, stepping forward and placing a hand on his shoulder. Osheen looked up at her, patted her hand, and smiled at her.

‘Thank you, Kez,’ he replied. ‘You’re one of the good ones.’

If you’re one of the good ones then we’re all fucked, E-NA said as Kez jogged out of the cafeteria and up the single flight of stairs towards the matter courier.

If this plan works, then I’ll be saving everyone, Kez replied, stopping at the top of the stairs and glancing around for a nanobot outlet. *Have you got the schematics?*

Printing them now, E-NA replied as Kez found the outlet. Within moments a large stream of nanobots had worked their magic, assembling themselves into a small device.

Aces, Kez thought, snatching up the device and moving on. Seconds later the doors to the matter-courier room slid open, revealing Jack standing at the main wall panel, attempting to override some security settings.

‘If you’re here to tell me that I should stay,’ he said, not looking up from his screen full of error messages, ‘then you better be bringing me a seriously great reason.’

‘I know who sent the message,’ said Kez, the sudden burst of speed

causing her to regret the nachos. Jack turned and cocked his head in confusion. He'd expected Osheen.

'Come again?'

'Can you keep a secret?' asked Kez, maintaining the confused look on Jack's face.

'No,' he replied, 'but I'll be gone soon enough so it won't matter.'

Kez made sure the door behind her was locked. She didn't want this information going further than it had to. 'I cheated on my exams,' she said. 'All of them. I'm only here so I wouldn't get caught, and ultimately I just want to find out what happened to my mum. Once that's done, the Affinity and I part ways forever, good riddance.'

Jack, blindsided by this barrage of information, cancelled his hastily written jump override to focus on the conversation. A good thing too as he'd slightly miscalculated and would have ended up roughly 30,000 miles above the planet he was aiming at.

'So you're telling me that the only person on the team who knows anything about time travel … doesn't,' he smirked. 'And you thought that this was the way to convince me to stay?'

'No,' said Kez. 'I'm telling you that this is lunacy, but it's useful lunacy. One trip to the past and I can cash in that favour from Fatoumata and cut decades off the search for my mum. That's worth the risk.'

Jack shrugged and turned his attention back to the controls.

'Nobody down there has anything I need.'

'You don't want any years off your sentence then?' asked Kez, playing her ace. 'I'm sure Fatoumata could reduce it, maybe even erase it entirely.'

Jack turned back around, slowly.

'I did my time,' he growled menacingly. It was Kez's turn to smirk.

'See, a friend of mine had a hunch about that. The dates didn't add up. One owed favour from a security Compat with poor poker skills and I confirmed it. You've got hundreds of years left, trapped inside your own noggin.'

'That isn't true.'

'Then why are you trying, and I'll say it, failing, to overwrite security systems designed to return day-release prisoners to prison?' Kez asked, going on tiptoes to see the screens over Jack's shoulder. 'Clerical error?'

Jack blanched, cornered. 'Obtaining classified information on that level is illegal,' he said.

‘Couldn’t help it,’ shrugged Kez. ‘I don’t have free will.’

‘Oh my god, get off the free will thing.’

‘I can’t,’ replied Kez, scrunching up her face. ‘I don’t have free will.’

Jack gritted everything he could before turning and shutting the controls down with a slap. He stomped over to the matter courier pad and rolled onto his back, hands over his eyes. ‘Why do you want me to stay so badly?’ he asked.

Kez joined him on the hard floor of the pad. Together they looked up at the mass of exposed wires that made up the ceiling above them, like someone had done a dot-to-dot puzzle with all of the stars.

‘I have a plan and I need your help with it. We do one mission, we tie everything up in a bow, and we’re done.’

‘Sounds easy enough,’ Jack said sarcastically. ‘What’s the catch?’

‘We become Austin Lang,’ said Kez. ‘Or rather, his message.’

‘Oh yes, you mentioned,’ said Jack, in a tone one usually reserves to communicate with the under-threes. ‘Difficult, considering we know nothing about the man.’

‘We don’t need to,’ said Kez, holding up the device that she’d crafted moments ago. ‘We just need to use this.’

Jack took the device from her hands, inspecting it himself. It was a conical mesh, the size of a pine cone, with a standard power coupling port in the bottom and a whole bunch of circuitry he didn’t understand tucked in the middle.

‘Nice goober,’ he said, handing it back. ‘Mind telling me what it is?’

‘A high-intensity transmitter I designed,’ Kez said. ‘I’ll need to pinch a power cell before we head out, but there’s bound to be one on this station that won’t be missed.’[fn33]

‘You planning on calling for help?’ Jack scoffed. ‘What’s the range on that little toy? A few feet? Hope Clive’s got his hearing aid on.’

Kez threw the transmitter into the air and caught it again.

‘With a clear shot and a big receiver on the other end, you could send a message to another galaxy with this “little toy”.’ Jack sat up.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Another galaxy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘*Really*?’

Kez chuckled and handed the device back for Jack to inspect. He stared at it, his face doing a superb impression of a trout. ‘So you want to be the one to send the signal in the first place?’ he asked quietly,

working out Kez's plan. 'If we send it back, then Austin Lang …'

'… is just a name,' grinned Kez. 'Another resolved paradox, like the list we rode in on. Just a kink in the spacetime curve, resolved with audio of a non-existent voice warning us about a non-existent person, looping forever.'

Jack laughed an unflattering laugh.

'You're going to get me killed aren't you.'

'Probably,' Kez beamed.

'Three questions.'

'Shoot.'

'What about the virus? The one removing Austin Langs from the Affinity databases.'

'Maybe there really aren't any,' Kez shrugged. 'Maybe the base code just has an error that nobody has worked out how to fix yet. Programming at that complexity has to have bugs.'

'Alright,' nodded Jack. 'That works for me. Question two. Why aren't you an engineer? Bright kid like you, surely that would be easier than this nonsense.'

'That's a career path that ends in the engine room,' explained Kez. 'Not much access to classified files, unlike exotic physics where you receive high-level clearance after a decade or two.'

'You really have it all planned out don't you?' Jack said, slightly in awe. He had never been this forward thinking at her age. Thinking about it, recent events proved that he wasn't much better at forward thinking at his age either. 'Question three then. Did she really mean this much to you?'

'Who?' asked Kez, hoisting herself onto an elbow.

'Your mother.'

Kez thought about this for a moment.

'She meant a lot to my dad, and he means a lot to me,' she said. 'She was close with a Compat too, E-NA. They went everywhere together, but only E-NA came back from their last mission.'

Jack elbowed up.

'She didn't tell you what happened?' he asked.

'She doesn't know,' replied Kez. 'Her logs have a gap of three days. Someone deleted her memories.'

'I thought that was impossible.'

It should be, muttered E-NA internally, as Kez shrugged.

'Fourteen years ago my mum vanished on an off-the-books mission for the Affinity,' she said. 'The same day I graduate, *I'm* called up for

an off-the-books mission.'

'Sounds like something's going on,' nodded Jack, returning to his horizontal position.

'Something is,' nodded Kez, as she slumped back as well. 'I'm going to find out what.'

For a moment, the pair lay there in silence, watching the cables sway gently as somebody moved about on the floor above. With a grunt, Jack got to his feet and offered Kez a hand.

'I'm in.' Kez took his hand and flew up to her feet. 'Thanks, Jack.'

'Don't mention it,' he smiled. 'Now, I'm off to find my bedroom. Goodnight.'

With a stiff nod he began to slalom around the boxes between himself and the exit, eager to put this day behind him.

'Jack?' Kez called after him.

'Yeah?'

'I don't think we get individual rooms,' she said. 'I think it's a dorm situation.'

Jack froze. His shoulders slumped as he sighed and nodded, accepting his fate.

'You know,' he said, 'there is a school of philosophical thought that says the human consciousness ends at the moment of sleep. We die every night, and are replaced every morning by an entirely new life.'

'Bit of a scary philosophy,' said Kez.

'Aye,' nodded Jack, 'but there is one significant improvement with this system. If I do indeed die tonight, some other arsehole has to be me tomorrow.'

With that, the two of them left the room, moments away from discovering the awful beds that lay waiting for them on the second floor of this fucking space station.

Chapter Fifteen

Day One

LUCAS | 2783

The room that Kez and her fellow travellers had been assigned to onboard *Lucas* really put the emphasis on the 'quarter' part of 'living quarters'. Two sets of bunk beds flanked a carpeted area that you'd have trouble getting a drinks trolley through, as a single window perfectly framed the dark eye at the centre of the black hole. Kez's nanobot allowance, normally enough to furnish an entire room, allowed her a replication of a single photograph of her with her dad, housed in a cheap-looking frame. Between the lack of her things, Eureka's snoring, Theo's whimpering, Jack's fidgeting, having to steal a power cell from the closest panel to her bed, endless searches for news stories about Ipricus, and the existential crisis on the other side of the glass, Kez hadn't slept much when Osheen burst in with a wakeup call the next morning.

'Rise and shine, campers!' he exclaimed as Bea played a trumpet sound effect. Kez noticed that the joviality in his voice was countered somewhat by the fact he looked exactly as tired as he did yesterday.

'Morning, boss,' Theo said, spryly leaping out of his bottom bunk, Affinity pyjamas hanging off his spindly frame like a duvet thrown over a javelin.

'Five more minutes,' Eureka mumbled, rolling over in the top bunk above him. 'The past will still be there when I get up.'

'Shower?' Kez asked hopefully, unsure if her eyes were blurry or Osheen was.

'Down the hall behind us,' Bea said. 'In use at the minute though.'

Kez spotted that the duvet on the bunk above hers had been thrown aside already, its occupant most likely stealing all the hot water.

Judas, she thought.

'Uniforms are here,' said Osheen, dumping a pile of frighteningly expensive fabric onto Theo's bed.[fn34] 'We'll meet up in, say, ten minutes?'

'Sixty,' groaned the voice of Eureka from under a duvet. 'Forty-five if I can turn up in this duvet.'

‘I’ll see you in ten,’ smiled Osheen, leaving with Bea.

‘Fantastic,’ said Theo, snatching up a uniform and noticing that the disguise strip was already attached around the neck. ‘For decency’s sake, I’ll change outside.’

‘Do you mind if I … ?’ Kez asked Eureka as Theo left.

‘I won’t peek at your skivvies,’ Eureka mumbled from beneath several hundred togs.

‘Thanks,’ said Kez, one foot speeding down a leg hole. ‘I was going to have a water shower, but I can’t be bothered.’

‘A water shower?’ chuckled Eureka. ‘What else can you shower with?’

Kez zipped up her uniform and poked Eureka’s duvet cocoon. Eureka emerged, less a beautiful butterfly and more a down-on-its-luck moth.

‘Behold,’ grinned Kez, connecting to the station’s interface and running the cleanliness program. Kez selected her preference for the day and the matter couriers got to work, removing everything that wasn’t supposed to be there. Dirt, bacteria, and grease vanished within a few seconds, leaving a blank canvas for the nanobots climbing up her leg to work their magic. Eyeliner was applied to a tolerance of one nanometre, hair was trimmed and styled, and a skincare routine was applied. Thirty seconds later, Kez looked as though she’d spent hours getting ready. ‘It’s not as comforting as hot water,’ she said, flopping back onto the bed, ‘but it is cleaner.’

‘I want one,’ said Eureka, sitting up groggily. ‘I’ll never need to be wet again.’

‘Now that’s a hell of a sentence to walk in on,’ said Theo, beaming away in his uniform, his perfectly shaped hair revealing that he too had been styled for the day. ‘Oh no, Kez! We’ve worn the same outfit!’

‘Those uniforms comfortable?’ Eureka asked, forgoing the ladder and hopping down from the bunk onto ill-prepared legs. ‘Looks a little tight.’

Tight? E-NA complained internally. *Bloody hell, it’s so far up your arse that I feel like I’m the one wearing it.*

‘It’s alright,’ said Kez. ‘I’ve worn worse.’

‘Same,’ grinned Theo.

‘Oh,’ Eureka quietly said, glancing at her arm. She’d just noticed that something very dear to her was missing.

‘Everything alright?’ asked Theo. It wasn’t, but Eureka nodded anyway.

‘Bugger me!’ said Kez, having tapped her disguise and suddenly

transformed into a supremely buff woman. ‘I’m huge!’

Theo grinned and joined in, transforming into an old man with an equally sized nose and chin.

‘I’m old!’ he giggled.

‘How am I this much larger?’ Kez asked, prodding her newfound bulging biceps. ‘I thought this was just a visual.’

‘The uniform has an outer layer that can expand at will,’ said Theo, having spent a few hours reading the documentation. ‘It can’t make you shorter or thinner, but it can—’

‘OW!’ yelled Kez suddenly, turning to Eureka while rubbing her own arm. Eureka looked back with wide, shocked eyes.

‘I’m so sorry …’ she said, looking as surprised as Kez was by the punch. ‘I just …’

‘You hit me!’

‘I thought it would feel like a bouncy castle,’ Eureka said, blushing. ‘I didn’t think you’d feel it.’

‘It’s artificial proprioception,’ Theo said, chuckling away.

‘Come again?’ asked Kez, rubbing her disguised arm.

‘External forces applied to the suit are simulated on your actual body, letting you know exactly where in space you are if the uniform makes you a different size. It’ll stop you tripping over or bumping into things all the time,’ explained Theo. ‘You really need to read the manual.’

‘It felt weirdly fizzy,’ said Eureka. ‘My whole hand tingled for a bit.’

‘Felt a lot more than fizzy to me …’ Kez grumbled.

‘Never meet your heroes, Kez,’ Theo said, tapping the other side of his neck. Silently, the wrinkles under the old man’s eyes smoothed out as his face was whipped backwards and away like a tablecloth. Kez flinched.

‘I really hate how that looks,’ she said, poking the folded face of the man that sat around the back of Theo’s neck. ‘Poor bastard looks deflated.’

‘What do you think, gang?’ asked Osheen, entering the room alongside Bea and a scruffy-looking old woman, complete with an ill-fitting cardigan. ‘An improvement?’

‘Bit tight,’ said Jack, his threatening tones somehow penetrating his artificially higher voice. ‘Every part of me that’s an outie is turning into an innie.’

‘The uniforms are tight to prevent interference with the projection,’ Osheen said, inspecting Jack’s disguise. ‘Some tightness is expected.’

Osheen tried to pinch some of the fabric hidden under Jack's transformed arm, but couldn't find purchase. He tried again, lifting some away, but based on Jack's expression, quickly realised that skin had come with it.

'Anyway,' he coughed. 'It's time for the mission briefing. Who's hungry?'

With that he and Bea left the room, with Kez, Jack, and Theo in tow. Eureka stayed behind, frantically trying to squeeze into her uniform without falling over, while inwardly cursing the very existence of morning people.

'Morning, all!' boomed Alphonse, slapping down a tray of brightly coloured fruit juices in front of Osheen and his travellers. 'Today is an apple and pear classic, with a twist of cherry and a waft of lime. Enjoy!'

'Cheers, big man,' Theo said, briefly raising his glass to a retreating Alphonse before downing half of it in one go. 'Lovely stuff.'

'Anything more … solid?' Eureka asked Kez. 'I'm not sure I understand this fruit juice thing.'

'Me neither,' shrugged Kez.

'It's the healthiest way to start the day,' said Osheen, not looking up from reams of notebooks and paperwork. 'Besides, the smell of cooking food in the morning makes me nauseous.'

'You don't like the smell of a fry-up?' Eureka asked, genuinely shocked.

'You forget that Osheen is a soulless husk,' said Bea. 'Anything that gives others joy is a pet peeve of his.'

'That's only partially true,' Osheen said, pointing a pen. 'In any case, I'm sure Alphonse will be happy to make you something else if you'd like. I believe there are some eggs on board, but I'm not entirely sure which species laid them.'

'When in Rome,' Eureka said, taking a sip of the nicest fruit juice she'd had in her life. 'Actually, I've been meaning to ask. Why do you have a chef on board? I thought we'd have perfected the food printer by now.'[fn35]

'We have,' said Osheen, rolling his eyes. 'Yet for some reason there are people who still prefer the analogue approach to cooking.'

'My dad's like that,' said Kez. 'He says if you got a hundred chefs to

make scrambled eggs, you'd get a hundred different scrambled egg dishes. So, which one do you replicate?'

'The food printers can make all of them,' Osheen mumbled to himself before giving Bea the signal to kick the meeting off. Bea rolled to the centre of the table and began projecting a 3D model of a landscape in front of everyone.[fn36]

'Lake Bosumtwi,' Osheen said, pointing at a particularly stunning expanse of water surrounded by a thick green jungle. 'It's ten kilometres wide, almost four hundred metres deep, and located in the western section of the African continent.'

Osheen clicked his pen, causing the image to zoom in and start dramatically panning around.

'On Earth today, it's an Affinity-protected land thanks to its inherent beauty and cultural significance. The Ashanti people considered it sacred for hundreds of years, and they believed the souls of their dead visited this lake before moving on.'

Click. A small red dot appeared.

'This is where our message was broadcast from,' Osheen said. 'Right at the heart of the lake of souls.'

Jack raised a hand, causing his uniform to audibly creak.

'If you think I can swim with this on, you are sorely mistaken.'

'Can these disguises even get wet?' Eureka asked, inspecting the delicate materials that spread across her body.

'No,' Osheen sighed. 'Water and that much delicate machinery do not mix. However, that's not a problem, as you'll be going here …'

Click. A new landscape, slightly familiar in some ways.

'Lake Bosumtwi formed as the result of a meteor impact roughly a million years ago,' he continued. 'As you will be there a million and a half years before *that*, I don't see much need for you to be able to swim.'

'Hell of a coincidence,' said Kez. 'The broadcast point being the exact centre of a future crater.'

'Good way of erasing any physical evidence,' Jack said.

'Speaking from experience?' Theo asked, that shit-eating grin making another appearance.

'He's right though,' said Osheen. 'No better way of hiding your footsteps than atomising them with a meteor.'

'So when we go back, we'll only have a million and a half years to complete our mission?' Theo asked, a little too cheekily for Jack's liking.

‘No,’ said Osheen. ‘Your visit took one hour, fourteen minutes and six seconds.’

‘Took?’ asked Eureka. ‘As in, past tense?’

‘Of course,’ Osheen grinned. ‘Hold on, I need to give you something.’ With a flurry of in-pocket action, Osheen eventually found and extracted a metal bar, about fifteen centimetres long and a few thick, with hinges at either end. Carefully he unfolded it until it made a square frame. He placed the frame on the table, tapped a hidden button on its side, and enjoyed the gasp when it opened.

‘Portable portal,’ he said as his travellers gazed into the space that had opened up inside the frame. Instead of seeing a grubby tablecloth, the group could see a small cupboard, filled to the brim with unidentifiable technology. Osheen reached in, his hand now goodness knows how many lightyears away, and pulled out a mass of wires, ports, and metal, roughly the same size as a brick.

‘This is the temporal beacon,’ he said. ‘Without this you will not be able to return home.’

Instinctively, four hands shot towards it. Osheen slapped three of them away.

‘Theo will be in charge of the beacon, as well as the team,’ he said, sliding the beacon over to Theo, who picked it up and held it like it was a new-born Teffarg.[fn37]

‘I will only acknowledge those of you who call me “King”, “Master”, or “God-above-all”,’ Theo beamed.

‘How about “Twat”?’ Eureka asked.

‘Compromise?’ offered Theo. ‘“Twat-master”?’

‘I’ll go as low as “Twat-above-all”,’ countered Eureka.

‘Deal,’ said the Twat-above-all.

Osheen decided to shake off his instant regret and plough on.

‘Before we send you back in time, we’ll randomly generate a code on this beacon, nothing more than a little burst of data. Something that could be waved away as background radiation, but with a secret digital signature hidden within. When you arrive in the past, you’ll automatically broadcast it towards the Project Novus satellite. When you leave, you broadcast it again.’

‘So you know exactly how long we’re out there for,’ Theo said, wondering if his uniform had any pockets for this unwieldy machine.

‘Of course,’ smiled Osheen. ‘The trip was completed millions of years ago, after all.’

‘From your perspective, are we actually going to be away for that

long?' Eureka asked. 'Or do we just vanish and re-appear instantly?'

'Gold star for that question!' Osheen said. 'The way the time machine works is that it's a single journey. It activates, we fling you back in time, it stays active, and then we pull you back after the allotted time. Think of it like a time tether, or a temporal bungee cord. You jump into the past and we'll pull you back.'

'Does this mean we're immortal in the past?' Kez asked. 'If you know we come home, you know we survive, right?'

'I know the *beacon* comes home,' said Osheen. 'The device has a fairly small range, about ten metres. If you're not in that space when the time's up—'

'—we don't come home with it,' Jack growled.

Silence. Osheen nodded at the ground.

'Can't you kick that distance up a notch?' asked Eureka. 'Or maybe give us handcuffs so we don't get separated?'

'It takes an enormous amount of power to get you home,' Osheen said desperately. 'We could theoretically increase the range infinitely, but you'd need a power pack the size of a building to make that increased range useful.'

Silence. Someone coughed, making the silence that followed somehow quieter.

'It also detects temporal anomalies down to a half metre!' Osheen blurted. 'That's how you'll be able to pinpoint where you're going!'

'I know where I'm going,' mumbled Jack, eyeing the door.

'Just stick together!' Osheen said. 'How hard is it going to be to stick together?!'

'Have you ever seen any film?' asked Kez. 'Read any books? Seen any plays?'

Jack heaved up oxygen that had been sitting at the bottom of his lungs to fuel a particularly loud sigh.

'Can we just get this over with?' he grumbled as he stood. 'We go back in time, we find the source of the signal, we report back, we fuck off and have a spot of dinner. Job done.'

'For once I'm with Jack,' said Theo, getting to his feet. 'Eureka, Kez, you ready?'

'Bit bored of it to be honest,' Eureka smiled as she joined the group. 'Time travel loses some of its lustre after the second time.'

'Kez?' Theo asked. 'You ready to go?'

'Of course,' Kez said, following the group as they headed towards the time machine, each step highlighted by a small shot of pain, as the

high-intensity transmitter she'd hidden in her hair scratched away at the same spot on her head, over and over again.

'Could you hold still please?' Osheen's transmitted voice echoed around the time machine. 'As Earth isn't our origin point, Malcolm is having to account for all sorts of stellar drift to a tolerance of no more than a metre. If he's a single second out you could be floating in space or embedded underground.'

Do you mind if I upload myself somewhere else for the next hour or so? E-NA asked internally as Kez watched the temporal focus point crackle and glow, illuminating the worried faces of the three other travellers standing around it. *Only I'd rather not die today.*

Nobody is dying today, Kez replied. *Two million years ago, maybe. Today, no.*

The ground shook, causing Kez to stagger slightly. The focus point started to fold out of the universe.

I can't believe I'm doing this again, E-NA sighed. *Following an idiot human into remarkable danger.*

Osheen was shouting decreasing numbers, but nobody could hear him over the roar of time being torn apart.

It'll be alright this time, Kez yelled inside her own head. *We've got a plan.*

E-NA sighed. *You really are your mother's daughter.*

I'll take that as a compliment, Kez thought, anxiety preventing a smile from forming.

Now moments before launch, bursts of anti-space bolted from the machine, bouncing around the edges of the dome, hungry to devour as much nothing as they could.

Here we go! Kez thought. *You ready?!*

Nobody replied.

E-NA?

Kez's eyes rapidly flicked to her system logs, where an upload to *Lucas*'s main computer had just finished. E-NA had bailed.

Oh, you dickhead.

With a final pulse the time machine fired, sending the four travellers back through the ages, three ready for an adventure, one trying to think of as many synonyms as she could for 'turncoat'.

As she hurtled the wrong way across time, Kez once again found herself in the dark place.

'Wait, I've been here before,' she said, looking around, her eyes unnecessarily open. 'Last time I travelled. How did I forget about this?'

Behind her, Kez felt the terrible living thing lean in closer. She couldn't tell if it was next to her ear, or billions of miles away.

'Hello?' Kez asked the thing.

'HELLO,' the thing replied. It hadn't actually said 'hello', but it felt like a 'hello'. Well, not really like a 'hello', more like a thought that had burrowed its way into Kez's head and then laid an egg which then hatched into a 'hello'.

Before Kez had processed the greeting, a jolt tore her away, continuing her journey back in time, and leaving the thing to spectate over its domain of nothing.

LAKE BOSUMTWI | 2,497,966 BC

The biggest irritant when it comes to living on a Homeship is one of radial geometry. If someone of average height stands at ground level of one of these colossal spheres, they'll notice that the horizon dips away after just a hundred or so metres. This, obviously, leads to some problems. Tall buildings loom into view like a vampire rising from their casket, golf is basically impossible, and unless you're seated near the middle, you're going to miss quite a bit of the action the next time your football team plays. Because of this, Kez's first thought about planet Earth was to notice how far she could see. Lush rainforest moguled away at an unbelievable distance before it fell beyond her view. She marvelled at the sheer fucking size of it, the absolute gargantuan nature of it all, before she had her second thought: Why exactly was she several metres above the tree line?

'FUCK,' Kez yelled, falling through the canopy, her descent softened by vines, twigs, and cerebrospinal fluid.

'Everyone alright?' Theo asked, already up on his new leg and helping Jack to his feet. 'Eureka? Kez?'

'I'm fine,' Kez said, slapping dirt and foliage off her jumpsuit. 'This'll take some dry-cleaning though.'

'Anyone see Eureka?' Theo asked, looking around. 'She didn't land with us.'

'Incoming!' Eureka announced, swinging towards the group on a

vine. She dismounted, landing softly on the ground, right hand splayed out on the soil, left hand in the air behind her, feet wide apart. The perfect three-point landing. Jack mumbled something rude as he wiped dirt off his uniform, his face scuffed from the descent.

'I caught a branch,' Eureka shrugged. 'Basic training stuff.'

'You used to train to fall out of the air?' asked Kez.

'I was a test pilot so … yeah.'

A loud buzzing whizzed past Theo, causing him to perform a sudden spin.

'What was that?' he asked, pointing at something blurry flying away into the trees.

'Where?' Eureka asked, following Theo's finger. With the two of them distracted, Kez reached into her hair and released the small nanobot hooks holding her transmitter in place. Discreetly she checked it over, making sure that it had survived the journey. It had not.

The transmitter, or what was left of it, lay in her open palm, as obliterated as Jack's hopes for his future. Kez moved it around with her finger, making a mental list of all the replacement components she'd need to wait a few million years to pick up.

'Of course,' Jack said, staring down at the debris of the transmitter. 'That's what I get for trusting someone.'

'Hey, you two!' Theo suddenly said, causing Kez to panic and throw the remains of her 'Plan A' into the foliage behind her. 'As your twat-above-all, I've got an important announcement to make.'

Jack grumbled angrily, already well into his count of 4,446 seconds.

'I want to congratulate Kez on the very first word spoken in human history,' Theo beamed. 'One for the record books!'

'What?' Kez asked, genuinely bewildered. 'What did I say?'

'I believe,' said Theo, 'and I might be wrong as I was falling at the time. I believe it was … "Fuck".'

'Fuck?' asked Kez.

'Fuck,' nodded Theo.

'Fuck …' said Kez

'Not exactly "One Small Step",' Jack chuckled. 'Easier to remember though.'

'No fucks in the history books …' sighed Eureka.

'JESUS!' Kez suddenly yelled, adding to her accolades with the first ever act of blasphemy.[fn38] Her reason for this was absolutely justified, as a large, spindly insect had landed on her arm. Kez's immediate reaction, well, second reaction, was to swat it. With a thwack the bug

fell, crumpled and twitching, onto the ground.

'You did not …' said Jack, shaking his head.

'That's rule one!' said Theo. 'When we get back to the present, we'll find the world overtaken by sentient duct tape! Earth's moon will be green!'

'I bet it'll rain flowers,' Eureka nodded studiously. 'Everyone will wear neckties on their legs.'

'Would they still be called neckties?' asked Theo.

'Yep,' nodded Eureka. 'But nobody knows why.'

Eureka sold this pitch by wooing and wiggling her fingers in front of her. Theo laughed as Kez just stared at the bug, imagining the fractal-like tree of causality she just wiped away. Then the bug twitched slightly, causing her to panic and finish it off with a boot.

'Kez,' said Theo. 'While I might personally wish you hadn't done that, it's OK. Our actions here have already happened in our time. We're safe from the sentient duct tape, people.'

Kez nodded, her brain understanding, her soul fearful.

'Let's get cracking!' said Theo, raising the cumbersome beacon up in front of him. Kez noticed a dent in its casing, presumably from the fall. 'We've got a signal. A temporal anomaly is going to form in about fifty minutes, approximately half a kilometre north of here.'

'Fifty minutes?' asked Eureka. 'That's cutting close to our departure time.'

'Wait, shouldn't we have our disguises on?' Kez asked, the panic leaking out. 'Osheen was very insistent about that.'

'I don't think the locals are going to be taking pictures,' Eureka said. 'Anyway, if Osheen asks, we totally had them on the whole time.'

'Damn,' said Theo, scrunching his face up at the readings. 'We've got a problem.'

'Here we fucking go …' mumbled Jack.

'The beacon is detecting a second, much smaller anomaly,' Theo said, jabbing at a screen that wouldn't look out of place on an abacus. 'A couple of kilometres south of the first.'

'A *second* signal?' asked Eureka. 'What could that be?'

'I don't know,' Theo shrugged. 'It's something to investigate at the very least.'

The conversation died for a short while, leaving the group to be serenaded by the soft rustle of lush foliage and the occasional, unrecognisable animal call. After a time, Eureka vocalised the thought which at that very moment was resonating fear throughout everyone's

heart.

'We're going to have to split up, aren't we?'

Theo nodded. Jack punched a tree.

'What are you up to?' Eureka asked Kez half an hour later, sleepy from sitting under the prehistoric sun.

Kez didn't hear her. She was too busy concentrating on her own boots, head down, glaring at them, until suddenly she did a small hop and began to glare harder.

'Kez!' Eureka said, snatching up and pelting a small twig at her. 'Why are you jumping?'

'I don't like the gravity,' Kez said, picking the twig up and throwing it into the air, frowning as it fell. 'It's too … analogue.'

'Analogue?'

'Inconsistent,' said Kez, looking for the twig she'd failed to catch. 'It's all over the shop.'

Eureka laughed from atop the rock she'd parked herself on. 'Sloppy craftmanship,' she nodded. 'You should put a complaint in.'

Kez jumped again, landed, and scowled.

'The sun is too quiet,' she said. 'It's unnerving.'

'Too … quiet?'

Kez pointed at the sun, as if the woman who once held the record for its closest fly-by didn't know where it was. 'That bastard is two octillion tonnes of fire and furore, and there is nothing besides a thin film of gas between us. It's *unnervingly* quiet.'

Eureka cocked her head.

'Not to mention the ground,' Kez said, jumping again. 'Feel that? It's barely a solid.'

'All planets are fluid if you look at them for long enough,' said Eureka.

This statement didn't please Kez. Stoically, she went back to her jumping and glaring. It took several more hops before Eureka clocked what was happening.

'You've never been on a planet before, have you?' she said, fascinated by the potential response.

'Never saw the point,' Kez said. 'Stations and Homeships are more comfortable, safer, and less … exposed.'

A slight breeze wafted through the forest, causing Kez to shiver

slightly and cement her opinion in her mind.

'I just like a bit of a barrier between myself and space,' Kez said. 'Something real.'

Eureka looked up at the blue sky above her. It was spackled with white clouds, wafting leaves, and a handful of ancient birds. 'I've never thought of it that way,' she said, watching the clouds slowly melt and fold around air currents. 'If I had a stick long enough, I could poke the sun.'

'Awful, isn't it,' Kez said, hopping.

'So, where do you call home?' Eureka asked, half her mind on the conversation, the other half working out the physics of a stick that could poke the sun.

'I've got a room in a rundown station, orbiting a rundown world,' Kez said, missing it terribly. 'You?'

'History books not have my address?' Eureka asked with a chuckle.

'Maybe. I wasn't very good at history.'

'Hence, "Ethel",' Eureka grinned.

Kez cringed deeply, aware that this was a moment that her mind would now replay every night as she lay down to sleep.

'I'm from New Berlin,' Eureka continued. 'Born and raised.'

'The one on the Moon or Ganymede?' Kez asked, gently blowing Eureka's mind.

'I'm a Luna girl,' she replied. 'So's my Lily. When we were kids, she used to live in the apartment above me.'

'Childhood friends to sweethearts,' Kez said, a part of her that she hated melting slightly. 'Adorable.'

Eureka smiled and looked up through the canopy, hoping to catch a glimpse of a daytime moon through the leaves. She wondered if she'd even recognise it without the glow of its city lights.

'It's funny,' Eureka said. 'She's not even born yet, and when we go back she will have been dead for hundreds of years.'

'Is that … funny?' wondered Kez.

'In the history of the universe, only a tiny sliver of time had her in it,' Eureka nodded to herself, gently rocking wonderful memories about. 'I guess I just got lucky.'

'That's a nice way to look at it.'

Eureka nodded, allowing herself a few seconds to imagine Lily on this mad journey with her. The two of them, side by side, on a world so ancient it might as well be alien. Lily would have hated it. They went camping once and she declared war on the concept of weather.

‘How do *you* look at it?’ Eureka asked.

Kez thought about it for a second. Herself, far in the future, away from the universe she knew. She realised that, if it wasn’t for a single smiling face, she’d barely notice the difference. ‘I’d miss my dad,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Eureka softly. ‘Now that’s something I understand far too well.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Kez.

‘Don’t be,’ Eureka replied, her hand subconsciously rubbing against her wrist for a watch that was no longer there. ‘He was a great man. If it wasn’t for him, there wouldn’t be a Captain Eureka Elspeth Shine.’

Kez instinctively snorted. She tried to stop it midway, but it just made her tear ducts itch.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she gasped, eyes wide.

‘I’m just happy it’s not on the statues,’ Eureka sighed.

She stood up, stretching her arms towards the sky, various joints popping satisfyingly. It had been far too long since she’d just sat in the sun. Any sun.

‘This is nice,’ she smiled. ‘It’s like being on holiday.’

‘Some holiday,’ said Kez, plucking the head off a nearby flower, the fifth to perish that way today. ‘Blown up, sent careering through time, met aliens, sent careering back in time, forced to solve an ancient puzzle.’

‘I come from the era of budget space travel,’ said Eureka. ‘Comparatively, we’re getting off lightly.’

Kez chuckled. ‘If I was you, this would all be doing my head in,’ she said. ‘I don’t know how you’re coping.’

Eureka thought about this. Sure, a therapist in the twenty-second century was going to have their work cut out for them, but she felt fine. Truly fine. The sort of fine that people feel just before they realise they’ve been shot.

‘My scar is gone,’ she said softly.

‘Scar?’ Kez asked, turning her attention to Eureka, much to the happiness of nearby plant life.

‘When I was little, Lily tried to get me in trouble for something. I can’t remember what, but I cut my arm as I was running away. I’ve had that scar my whole life.’

Eureka rolled up the sleeve of her uniform, admittedly with some difficulty, and showed off a flawless arm. No scars, moles, or any distinguishing features, as was the way with regenerative technology.

‘I don’t know why, but right now that’s the only thing that’s bothering me. It feels like a part of me has gone.’

‘Same thing happened to me,’ said Kez. ‘I used to have this verruca on the underside of my foot that I never told anyone about. If I ever worried I had been replaced by a robot or a clone, I could check the verruca.’

Eureka sat back down on her rock. This conversation had taken a turn she wasn’t sure about.

‘Then,’ Kez continued, ‘one day I wake up … and guess what?’

‘No verruca?’ offered Eureka.

‘Gone!’ Kez exclaimed.

‘So what did you do?’

Kez looked at Eureka, almost no expression on her face, like she was unsure which one to load up.

‘Huh?’ she managed.

‘Are you a robot or a clone?’ Eureka asked.

‘Oh,’ said Kez. ‘I never thought about it again.’

Eureka slid from the rock to the floor, stretching her legs out in front of her.

‘You’re right,’ she giggled. ‘That’s exactly what happened to me.’

Suddenly, with a crackle of pre-historic interference, Theo’s voice made an appearance.

‘Wotcha,’ he chirped. ‘Any time travellers your end?’

‘Just the two that you left here,’ replied Eureka. ‘No appearances yet.’

‘Same this side,’ said Theo. ‘Shouldn’t be long until the first rift appears and—’

‘How’s the beacon?’ Jack asked, cutting Theo off.

Eureka looked at the device sitting on the rock with her. The countdown on its screen ticking along relentlessly.

‘Still here,’ said Eureka, patting it.

‘I still think we should have left it halfway between us,’ grumbled Jack.

‘That’s a bad idea, you see that right?’ snapped Theo.

‘Not as bad an idea as smuggling something into the past with you,’ Jack said, causing Kez’s heart to perform a wonderful backflip pike, diving gracefully into an ice-cold plunge pool.

He wouldn’t dare …

‘Who brought what?’ Eureka asked with an air of playful accusation.

He wouldn’t …

‘DNA sampling kit,’ Theo admitted sheepishly. Kez breathed again.

‘We’re still not at our location yet,’ Jack said. ‘Theo keeps veering us off course to chase down some poor unsuspecting deer ancestor.’

‘How many DNA samples have you got so far?’ Eureka asked.

‘Eight,’ replied Theo.

‘And how many injuries?’

‘Nine,’ Theo beamed.

‘I can see it now,’ Eureka said, waving her hands in the air. ‘The greatest attraction of all time, Cenozoic Park!’

Theo began to pitch some slogans for this venture, but Eureka and Kez didn’t hear them, distracted as they were by a blue light pulsing on the side of the beacon.

‘A rift is about to open,’ Eureka reported, snatching it up and reading between the lines of some heavy mathematics.

‘Our one?’ asked Kez, her eyes scanning the area around them, trying to spot a part of it vanishing. Half a second later a deep explosion shook the ground, sending a blanket of leaves cascading downwards, and thousands of birds into the air.

‘Guess not,’ Kez gasped.

‘Theo?’ Eureka asked. ‘Jack?’

No response. The communication had been severed.

‘Come on!’ exclaimed Eureka, bounding into the undergrowth. Kez followed, hoping that Earth’s human population hadn’t just halved.

The ringing in Theo’s ears threatened to shake him apart as he dragged his bloodied body into a seated position against a tree. In front of him lay the smouldering remains of twenty metres of forest, utterly flattened by the unexpected blast. ‘Jack?’ he croaked, blood coming up with the syllables. ‘You still with me?’

‘Regretfully,’ came the reply from Jack, muffled from the dirt he was still face down in. ‘Yourself?’

‘I’m fine,’ lied Theo, watching Jack slowly climb to his feet. ‘Just need a breather.’

‘And a leg,’ Jack said, trying not to throw up.

‘A leg?’ Theo asked, putting the effort in to lift his head off the warm bark. His leg, which had previously gone all the way down to his foot, was gone, as was the foot. Jagged flesh and blood capped it off just above his knee. ‘Morag is going to kill me,’ he said, heavily returning

his head to the trunk. ‘She spent ages on that leg.’

‘It’s being cauterised,’ Jack noted, watching Theo’s nanobots apply first aid automatically. ‘Are you in any pain?’

Theo shook his head. The world shook for much longer than he did.

‘They’ve numbed the nerves,’ he said. ‘Lovely little buggers.’

Theo allowed his eyes to close, just for a second or two. When he opened them again the smoke had cleared significantly, the ringing in his head was much quieter, and two concerned and panting women were approaching him.

‘What happened?’ Eureka asked as she squatted down next to Theo, almost kneeling in the remnants of his leg.

‘Not sure,’ said Theo. ‘You told us the rift was coming and then … boom.’

‘You were supposed to warn us,’ Jack growled.

‘We did,’ Eureka said, checking Theo over using her mostly out-of-date medical training. ‘The beacon only—’

‘Wait,’ Jack said, wildly glancing around. ‘Where is the beacon?’

‘Kez has it,’ Eureka said, pointing behind her, vaguely at where she thought Kez was standing. Kez wasn’t there. She had walked into the centre of the clearing, the last wisps of smoke contouring around her as she went. She found the centre, not difficult as it was the place all the collapsed trees were facing away from, and dropped to her knees, holding the beacon up to check readings. After waving it around a bunch, she prodded at something on the ground, scooped it up, and returned to the group.

‘I think this caused the explosion,’ she said, tossing the beacon over to Jack and holding the culprit in the upturned palm of her hand.

‘How do you know?’ Theo asked, squinting through both the haze that surrounded him and the one exclusive to his eyesight.

‘Because it’s not meant to be here,’ Kez said, terrifyingly calmly as she held her finding closer to Theo.

Theo leaned forward, blinking heavily several times, trying to clear his vision enough to see details instead of blurry shapes.

‘It’s a screw,’ he said.

Kez nodded. It was a screw, charred from the explosion, with some additional damage on the head. Someone had been a tad overzealous tightening it, causing some of the archaic cross-shaped slot to be eroded away.[fn39]

‘A screw, millions of years before someone invented the screwdriver,’ Eureka said.

‘Found in the centre of a crater,’ Kez added.

‘A screw did this?’ Jack asked, looking around at the absolute destruction. ‘A single screw?’

‘It can’t be the screw,’ groaned Theo. ‘A regular screw wouldn’t have survived the blast.’

‘Unless it was in the eye of one hell of a storm,’ said Eureka. ‘If they did use a time machine and it failed in some way, just imagine the energy that had nowhere to go.’

‘Boom,’ said Theo, adding some raspy sound effects for good measure.

‘You know,’ Jack said, ‘this would be a much more fun conversation were we *not* standing at ground zero of a vast future crater.’

Slowly, simultaneously, the entire group turned to stare out at the devastation. The dissipating smoke. The scorched earth. The trees ripped up and tossed away like blades of grass.

‘Theo …’ asked Eureka quietly. ‘You said this rift was smaller than the other, right?’

‘No,’ Theo rasped. ‘I said that this one was *much* smaller.’

With a crack, a tree at the edge of the clearing gave up and collapsed, shattering into splinters as it landed.

‘Right then,’ said Jack calmly, before turning and bolting into the forest as fast as he could, vanishing in seconds.

‘Prick …’ Kez observed.

‘Up you get,’ Eureka said, offering a hand to Theo. ‘We’ve got a potential blast radius to clear.’

‘Eureka …’ Theo began.

Eureka rejected this thought before Theo spoke it, roughly grabbing him under his arm and heaving him off the ground. ‘We’ll be OK,’ Eureka said, straining under Theo’s dead weight. ‘We’ve got a few minutes, and Jack’s going nowhere without the beacon.’

A memory flashed before Eureka. Kez throwing the beacon, it sailing through the air, Jack catching it.

‘We’ll be OK,’ Eureka repeated. She shot Kez a look, followed by a few more until Kez realised what was going on. She held back for a moment, half of her wanting to bolt after Jack, the other wanting to bolt after Jack faster. Another withering look from Eureka overtook her reasoning, and she positioned herself under Theo’s other arm. While they took their tentative first steps, Kez began to track Jack via the beacon. It wasn’t exactly a satellite view, but a direction and distance was good enough.

‘You don’t have the time,’ Theo said, grimacing in pain as they slowly began to follow Jack’s path. ‘You should leave me and go.’

‘He’s right you know,’ Kez said, watching Jack’s distance marker move further and further away in her NPC augmented vision. ‘The asshole is trying to clear the entire blast radius.’

‘Then we’ll have to speed up,’ Eureka said, her face reddening with effort each second. ‘We have enough time.’

‘I think we should just go,’ Kez panicked.

‘Kez!’ said Eureka.

‘She’s right,’ said Theo.

‘I’m not leaving anyone to die,’ Eureka said as the three of them turned sideways to fit through a thin gap in the foliage, rough leaves and bark scratching away at skin.

‘Not again anyway,’ muttered Kez.

A thick root caught Eureka’s foot, causing her to stumble forwards. As she recovered, Theo’s arm slipped from around her and he crashed to the ground, a rock driving into his ribs. He rolled onto his back, breathing sharply.

‘Don’t you dare,’ snapped Eureka, moving to check over Theo. ‘Not now.’

‘Sore spot?’ Kez said. ‘So there’s truth to the idea that you knew the *Paracosm* wasn’t ready when you took her out on that flight?’

‘Funny that someone who didn’t know my name suddenly knows something about my life,’ Eureka said, not feeling quite so fine all of a sudden.

‘I don’t know who that king with six wives was, but I know he had six fucking wives,’ spat Kez.[fn40] ‘I’m just not interested in being stranded in the past so you can work on your latent guilt.’

Eureka teed up a response, but became distracted by the sound of pained laughter.

‘Chase that bus,’ Theo chuckled from the floor. ‘You can make it.’

‘You OK, Theo?’ asked Eureka, squatting down next to him.

‘I grew up in the middle of nowhere, in a little house with a long road leading up to it,’ he said. ‘Barely any electricity, no teleporters, even the landing pads were just circles cut into the wheat. I had to get a bus to school. Wheels and a battery. So primitive.’

Theo smiled at the memory.

‘One day, I was running late and I could see the bus coming down the road from my window. I pointed it out to my mum, and she told me to chase it.’

Theo was there now, in the memory. He was looking out of his window, the one with the crack in the outside layer that caused condensation to build up when it was cold, and watching that rickety bus heading his way.

'So I did. I went pelting out of my room, grabbed my bag, threw on my shoes, and out I went, running across that damn road. The bus was going slowly, stuck behind an industrial vehicle of some sort. I kept thinking, "I can make this. I can do it."'

Kez noticed that the top fragments of soil had started to shake slightly. They didn't have much time left.

'Well, come on then,' Eureka said, as she offered a hand to Theo, 'Let's chase that bus!'

Theo shook his head, losing a few tears into his hair as he did.

'I never made it,' he said. 'I fell at the end of my drive. I watched that bus drive by slowly, my entire class laughing at me. I promised myself I'd never run for the bus again.'

'Why are you telling us this?' Eureka asked, despite all three of them knowing the answer.

'Context,' Theo said, heaving himself up onto an elbow to look at them. 'Now, get out of here.'

'I'm not going to leave you, Theo,' Eureka said through the lump in her throat. 'That's not what I do.'

Kez bit her tongue this time.

'I'll be alright here,' Theo said, looking up at the sky through the intertwining branches above, the brilliant sunlight making the leaves almost translucent. 'I've been left in worse places. You just have to promise me one thing.'

'Anything,' said Eureka.

'Tell Morag I'm sorry. For everything.'

Kez tried to say something. Anything. Eureka simply managed to mouth, 'OK'.

'Thanks,' Theo smiled. 'Now, off you pop. Tell everyone I died fighting a dinosaur or something.'

It took them a small amount of time, but they eventually walked away, leaving Theo alone, lying in the prehistoric dirt.

'Not a bad place for it,' Theo smiled, watching the birds in the sky above glide on by.

Jack stared at the countdown on the beacon as it entered its final minute. Any further and he wasn't sure if the others would make it to him. As long as they hadn't stopped, they'd get here in time. Fifty seconds.

The sky began to grow dark as thick clouds hastily formed overhead. Whatever was happening at the rift site, the local weather patterns weren't a fan.

Forty seconds.

Jack thought briefly about running back for the three of them, but shook that thought off. He wasn't sure he was far enough away as it stood.

Thirty seconds.

The undersides of the clouds slowly started to glow a dark purple, as if they were being illuminated by something immense.

Twenty seconds.

Jack heard his name called. It was far away. He called back, standing his ground.

Ten seconds.

Jack spotted Eureka and Kez running towards him, their faces, like the forest around them, were a crackling purple. A cacophonous roar rushed over them as Kez wound back a fist. With a scream that was lost in the ear-splitting noise, she let it fly. It took two and a half million years to connect, but when it did, Jack's nose cracked in three separate places.

'BASTARD,' Kez screamed, forgetting the brief trip back through the darkness they had all just undertaken, as Jack fell backwards onto the time-machine floor, a squirt of blood flecking onto the ground beside him. Osheen appeared inside the machine with a snap, the celebratory champagne bottle in his hands seriously inappropriate for the moment.

'Kez! Why did you … ? Wait, where's Theo?'

'He killed him!' Kez yelled, Eureka holding her back semi-willingly. 'He left him to die!'

'We all did,' whispered Eureka bitterly.

Jack wiped the blood off his nose, a sting of pain indicating just how much damage he'd received.

'I'm sorry,' he growled, getting to his feet. 'I didn't think.'

'What happened?' Osheen asked, piecing the story together. 'Jack, what did you do?'

'He ran off with the beacon,' Eureka said with a deadly seriousness. 'The other goddamn rift didn't even explode!'

‘Explode, what do you mean … ?’ Osheen asked, before realising something far, far worse. ‘The mission was a failure?’

‘Fuck your mission!’ Kez snapped, breaking free of Eureka and throwing another punch Jack’s way. With a quick reaction, Jack caught the punch in his left hand. With a second motion, he twisted, causing agony to shoot through Kez.

‘Fuck this mission,’ he snarled. ‘Fuck this machine, and fuck you.’

Jack pulled his arm way back, the same rage that destroyed Ipricus boiling over inside. As his fist reached the position that he believed would deliver the strongest blow, his arm gently grazed the temporal focal point in the centre of the room, discharging an unbelievable amount of temporal energy through him.

To understand what occurred next, imagine a stream of water coming out of a tap. This is time. It flows one way, smoothly and consistently. Interruptions, while distressing to the flow, are only temporary. Time always sorts itself out.

Now, staying with that analogy, Jack’s actions were the equivalent of him picking up a very large sledgehammer and bashing the tap until the house it was attached to fell down, and water started to pour out of a pipe somewhere near where the drive used to be. With this action, time itself died, ending this particular version of the universe. Kez watched as the space outside the time machine began to glow white, like the darkness had been replaced by stars. She wrenched her arm from Jack’s grip, but it was far too late. Jack, and the universe around him, shattered. Nothing they ever were, are, or shall be remained.

Then, she went too.

Chapter Fifteen

Day One

LUCAS | 2783

The room that Kez and her fellow travellers had been assigned to onboard *Lucas* really put the emphasis on the 'quarter' part of 'living quarters'. Two sets of bunk beds flanked a carpeted area that you'd have trouble getting a drinks trolley through, as a single window perfectly framed the dark eye at the centre of the black hole. Kez's nanobot allowance, normally enough to furnish an entire room, allowed her a replication of a single photograph of her with her dad, housed in a cheap-looking frame. Between the lack of her things, Eureka's snoring, Theo's whimpering, Jack's fidgeting, having to steal a power cell from the closest panel to her bed, endless searches for news stories about Ipricus, and the existential crisis on the other side of the glass, Kez hadn't slept much when Osheen burst in with a wakeup call the next morning.

'Rise and shine, campers!' he exclaimed as Bea played a trumpet sound. Kez noticed that the joviality in his voice was countered somewhat by the fact he looked exactly as tired as he did yesterday.

'Morning, boss,' Theo said, spryly leaping out of his bottom bunk, Affinity pyjamas hanging off his spindly frame like a duvet thrown over a javelin.

'Five more minutes,' Eureka said, rolling over in the top bunk above him. 'The past will still be there when I get up.'

'Shower?' Kez asked hopefully, unsure if her eyes were blurry or Osheen was.

'Down the hall behind us,' Bea said. 'In use at the minute though.'

Kez spotted that the duvet on the bunk above hers had been thrown aside already, its occupant most likely stealing all the hot water.

Judas, she thought.

'Uniforms are here,' said Osheen, dumping a pile of frighteningly expensive fabric onto Theo's bed.[fn41] 'We'll meet up in, say, ten minutes?'

'Sixty,' groaned the voice of Eureka from under a duvet. 'Forty-five if I can …'

… *turn up in this duvet,* Kez thought along with Eureka. Odd.

'I'll see you in ten,' smiled Osheen, leaving with Bea.

'Fantastic,' said Theo, snatching up a uniform and noticing that the disguise strip was already attached around the neck. 'For decency's sake, I'll change outside.'

'Do you mind if I … ?' Kez asked Eureka as Theo left.

'I won't peek …'

… *at your skivvies*, Kez thought, once again following along with Eureka's words. She shook it off.

'Thanks,' said Kez, one foot speeding down a leg hole. 'I was going to have a water shower, but I can't be bothered.'

'A water shower?' chuckled Eureka. 'What—'

'—else can you shower with?' Kez finished, zipping up her uniform. 'Have we had this conversation before?'

'We've only spoken for like five minutes,' said Eureka. 'I don't think alternative showering methods came up.'

'That makes sense,' shrugged Kez. 'I guess I'm just having some déjà vu right now.'

'That doesn't bode well for a day of time travel,' Eureka chuckled from under her duvet cocoon. It took a few seconds for her to hear her own words. 'You don't think …' she began, sitting bolt upright. Kez didn't reply; she instead pointed at the door.

'Theo.'

The door opened, and in walked Theo, beaming away in his uniform, his perfectly shaped hair revealing that he, unlike Kez, had been styled by his nanobots for the day

'Oh no, Kez! We've worn the same outfit!' he smiled, before noticing that the faces looking his way were concerned. Quickly, he checked himself over.

'I know it's a little tight on me …' he muttered.

Tight? E-NA complained internally. *Bloody hell, it's so far up your arse that I—*

—feel like I'm the one wearing it, Kez replied.

Oh … I don't like that, muttered E-NA. *Either something's going on or I need to work on my material.*

'Kez is experiencing some déjà vu,' said Eureka. 'On today of all days.'

'It's more than that,' said Kez. 'I'm remembering things. Eureka's arm. Deflated man. Old lady in a cardigan.'

'My arm?' Eureka asked, shimmying up her pyjama sleeves to look at

them. ‘What about my—?’

Eureka stopped, noticing that something very dear to her was missing.

‘Oh,’ Eureka said, as Kez mouthed the word simultaneously.

‘We need an adult,’ said Theo, slowly backing away. ‘I’ll go grab Osheen.’

‘He’ll be here in a few minutes,’ said Kez. ‘After Eureka hits me.’

‘I hit you?’ asked Eureka in shock. ‘Why would I hit you?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Kez, reaching for the frayed edges of memories that were just out of her grasp. ‘I put on my disguise and …’

She tapped the side of her neck, transforming into a supremely buff woman. ‘Bugger me,’ she mumbled, poking her own arm. ‘How am I this much larger?’

‘The uniform has an outer layer that can expand at will,’ said Theo, having spent a few hours reading the documentation. ‘It can’t make you shorter or thinner, but it can—’

‘I wanted to hit you,’ Eureka blurted at Kez. ‘Just then. To see what the inflated uniform felt like.’

‘Maybe you should,’ shrugged Theo. ‘Surely sticking to previous events is a good idea in this situation.’

‘Maybe doing things this way around is what— OW!’ yelled Kez suddenly, turning to Eureka while rubbing her own arm. Eureka looked back with wide, shocked eyes.

‘I’m so sorry …’ she said, looking as surprised as Kez was by the punch. ‘I didn’t think you’d feel it.’

‘Artificial proprioception!’ Kez exclaimed.

‘You read the documentation?’ Theo asked.

‘No … I …’ Kez struggled to attach a meaning to the words she’d just said. Where had she heard them before? What did they mean? What the hell was going on?

‘What do you think, gang?’ asked Osheen, entering the room alongside Bea and a scruffy-looking old woman, complete with an ill-fitting cardigan. ‘An improvement?’

‘Osheen, Jack, something’s not right,’ Kez said in a panic. ‘I’m experiencing precognition, which I personally believe is a *major* red flag on …’

Kez trailed off, noticing that the room was now staring at her with a whole new set of confusion. ‘Something I said?’ she asked. The old woman in the cardigan tapped her neck, causing her disguise to slip away and Kez to back up to the far wall, which to be honest, wasn’t

that far away at all.

'Kez?' Osheen asked slowly. 'Who's Jack?'

'Aaaa,' said Kez, extending her tongue as one of Morag's arms pressed it down with a small metal paddle and another shone a torch down her throat.

'Right,' said Morag, her gloves breaking back down into nanobots that ran off to disinfect themselves. 'I have tested her in every medical way I can, from modern medicine to one step short of drilling a hole in her head. There's nothing wrong with her.'

Morag delicately placed a small golden star sticker on Kez's forehead and ruffled her hair.

'I've not seen you flick a torch into her eyes,' Osheen said, leaning forward on a chair he'd dragged over. 'Do that one.'

'Oh yes, of course,' said Morag sarcastically. 'After two hours of testing, it'll be *pupil constriction* that solves this.'

Osheen didn't move. Morag sighed and flicked a bright light into Kez's eyes, one at a time.

'Oh look at that,' she muttered. 'You're not brain dead. Well done.'

A second sticker was placed next to the first.

'I told you, Osheen,' said Kez, peeling the stars off her skin and placing them on the small bedside table. 'I feel fine.'

'You've got to realise, Kez, he doesn't want that,' said Morag. 'He wants you to be sick.'

'Why?' asked Kez, shocked, but not that surprised.

'Because of the alternative,' said Morag. 'If you don't have a bug, his time machine does.'

Osheen slumped back into his chair, silently fuming.

'It's not a bug, it's a feature!' he said, palms against eyes, too exhausted for this early in the morning. 'Can't it just be a little bit of stress? Anxiety? I'll take madness.'

'Charming,' muttered Eureka, currently wishing she'd stayed outside with the others.

'Face it, sweetie,' Morag said, whipping off the bedding behind her and replacing it with unerring precision. 'Occam's razor isn't on your side here.'

'So, you believe me that Jack was real?' Kez asked.

'Of course,' groaned Osheen as he extracted his bootstrap

instructions from his inner pocket. He re-read the four names from the scrap of paper, none of which were 'Jack'. 'I just don't know *why* he was real.'

'Knock knock!' said Clive brightly, entering the medical bay without knocking. 'Someone call for HR?'

'Over here, Clive,' Morag waved. 'We've got some time bullshit to deal with.'

'You called HR?' Osheen scoffed. 'As if I wasn't suffering enough.'

'It's protocol,' said Morag, her logic failing to make a dent in Osheen's sulk.

Clive ignored all of this and began to dig through his briefcase as he wandered over to the group, eventually producing what he was looking for. He handed it over to Kez.

'"So, you might be in a time loop",' Kez read, opening the pamphlet that had been placed into her hands.

'This should contain all the information you need,' Clive said, beaming away through his moustache.

'You give this one out a lot?' Kez asked, glancing over a paragraph about 'bootstraps'.

'Quite often,' said Clive. 'Unfortunately, it's not been a time loop yet. It's often just regular old madness.'

'If only,' muttered Osheen.

'Human Resources deal with time loops now?' Eureka chuckled, before realising that nobody else was laughing.

'High-concept Resources,' said Clive. 'We're here to help with all manner of space phenomena, including, but not limited to, cryosleep withdrawal, accidental brain transfers, exposure to ancient artefacts, wormhole demons, malicious clones and/or holograms, seductive nebulae, and various forms of unwanted alien communications, such as dream invasions, internal voices, and ghosts.'

'Blimey,' said Eureka, desperate to know more about wormhole demons.[fn42] 'If I ever get trapped on a cowboy world, I'll give you a call!'

The room tutted. Someone mumbled, 'Too soon.'

'I don't think it's a loop,' Kez said, placing the pamphlet next to the stickers. 'I don't remember everything, but I know this new girl wasn't there the first time.'

'But you do remember her?' Morag asked.

'No,' said Kez. 'Up until she appeared in that changing room I'd never seen her before.'

Clive dived back into his briefcase, rustling through pamphlets at speed. ‘Multiverse?’ he offered, holding up the associated leaflet.

‘Hokum,’ scoffed Osheen. ‘Science-fiction garbage.’

‘But I’m remembering alternate events,’ Kez said. ‘Doesn’t that prove that there’s an alternate reality?’

‘If the multiverse existed then infinite universes in infinite combinations would be visiting us infinite times per second,’ said Osheen, desperate for a whiteboard. ‘The fact they’re not means it’s either impossible to move between them, or they don’t exist. Either way, it’s hard to care.’

‘Mirror universe?’ asked Clive, holding a pamphlet that featured a character with a goatee. Osheen threw a tray of medical instruments at him.

‘What happened to the other group of us?’ Kez asked. ‘From the first timeline. The ones who knew Jack?’

‘They never existed,’ said Osheen. ‘Well, they existed initially. They just never existed anymore.’

Morag’s NPC detected the first signs of a migraine forming in Kez’s brain and prescribed her some painkillers.

‘How about we go and get Jack, wherever he is out there, and ask him what he remembers?’ asked Kez. Osheen gave Morag a look, potentially about jabbing Kez with sedatives.

‘There are no Jack Braddocks that match the age or description you gave us,’ Osheen said. ‘No major or minor archaeological works under that name either. Your memories are the only place he exists.’

‘No wonder he punched the machine,’ Kez gulped, trying desperately to remember what his face looked like.

Osheen was on his feet before Kez’s words reached the back wall of the medical bay.

‘He did what?’ Osheen asked frantically.

‘He hit the sphere,’ Kez replied, memories of events that never happened flooding back. ‘Just after we returned.’

‘Of course!’ exclaimed Osheen. ‘All that latent temporal energy being redirected, it could have blown a hole in the universe! Instead, it just blew him out of it!’

‘He was holding my hand when it happened,’ Kez said, glancing down at her digits. ‘Is that why I remember him?’

‘Residual temporal information transfer via contact!’ Osheen practically yelled. ‘Do you know what this means?’

‘Jack’s definitely gone …’ whispered Kez.

‘No! Well, yes, but the time machine is fine!’ Osheen exclaimed triumphantly. ‘We can get back to the mission!’

With that he sped out of the room, almost giggling with excitement, leaving Kez behind with her third major existential crisis of the day.

‘He’s an asshole, right?’ Kez asked Morag. ‘It’s not just me?’

‘Grade A,’ agreed Morag. ‘But, as my old professor used to say, it’s better to know where an asshole is than to be surprised by one.’

Kez nodded, sighed, and left the room.

‘I mean, he was talking about alien biology,’ Morag said to herself as she tidied. ‘But I think the point stands.’

Iscah Bitar sat on her top bunk, legs dangling over the edge, information conflicting in her mind as her orange eyes gazed at nothing in particular.

She thought back to her childhood. The day they left that planet, the first life she saved, the fire, the day she walked away from it all. Then, this past week. Being caught, prison, release, yesterday, the time machine, the loop, Fatoumata. It was all real. It had all happened. Yet it hadn’t. Not for her. Or maybe it had, but she wasn’t the first. Or maybe …

Instinctively, she massaged the small sphere that was embedded in her palm, its golden face protruding slightly from her skin. It’s cool touch calmed her, as it had done for so many years. ‘I love,’ she said to herself, long dark hair waving as she nodded along with the affirmation. ‘And I am loved.’

She repeated this a few times, breathing between the lines, feeling out her place in the threads of the universe. As she did so, she suddenly felt the weight of a doubtful thought. She brought it forward, allowing it to speak.

If he loved you, you wouldn’t have been second.

Iscah attempted to process the doubt, tackling its points logically, allowing its weight to fall away. However, she was interrupted by a message. It was time to go.

She hopped down from the bunk, straightened out her uniform, and headed down to the time machine, the weight of doubt growing in her mind.

With a jolt of unnaturally displaced temporal energy, Kez's trip to the past was once again displaced to the lost place. As she gathered up her memories of the darkness, something was different.

'There's two of you,' Kez said, feeling the gaze of another entity.

'YES,' whispered the first.

'DEAD,' whispered the second.

'Dead?' asked Kez. 'Who's dead?'

'I,' replied the second.

'I'm sorry,' said Kez.

'ACCEPTED,' the thing replied, before laughing the sort of laugh that could tear a soul directly from a body.

LAKE BOSUMTWI | 2,497,966 BC

'FUCK,' Kez yelled, falling through the canopy, the memory of this botched landing arriving far too late to be of any use. In an attempt to land softer than previously, she reached for a passing vine, only to get her hand caught, causing her to flip over and land face first in the prehistoric mud.

'Everyone alright?' Theo asked, already up on his new leg and helping Iscah up. 'Eureka? Kez?'

'I'm fine,' Kez said, spitting dirt back onto the floor. 'Eureka's on her way.'

'Incoming!' Eureka announced a few seconds later, swinging towards the group on a vine. She dismounted, landing softly on the ground, right hand splayed out on the soil, left in the air behind her, feet wide apart. The perfect three-point landing.

'I'm annoyed that wasn't a one-off,' said Kez, her new memory of that event overlapping perfectly with the old one as a loud buzzing whizzed past Theo, causing him to perform a sudden spin.

'What was that?' Theo asked, pointing at something blurry flying away into the trees.

'Where?' Eureka asked, following Theo's finger. With the two of them distracted, Kez reached into her hair to release the small nanobot hooks holding her transmitter in place. It wasn't there.

The hell … ?

'Hey, you two!' Theo suddenly said, causing Kez to panic for no reason whatsoever. 'As your twat-above-all, I've got an important announcement to make.'

‘I said the first word in history,’ Kez said, remembering. ‘Fuck.’

‘Not exactly “One Small Step”,’ Iscah laughed, ‘but easier to remember.’

Kez locked eyes with Iscah, grey on orange, as Iscah and Jack’s faces merged together in her memories, Jack’s gruff features melting into Iscah’s soft ones and back again. They were obviously different people, hell, she was about a foot shorter, but something matched up. Something in the base code of the universe connected these two wildly different people. Kez would have thought about this for longer, had a massive bug not landed on her.

‘JESUS!’ Kez yelled. She swatted at it, but missed, causing the bug to fly off to a nearby tree. With the reaction time of a puma, and accuracy of a kitten, Kez scooped up and hurled a nearby rock at it, missing considerably.

‘What are you doing?!’ Theo gasped, trying to deflect some of Kez’s shots to protect the creature.

‘WE HAVE TO KILL THAT BUG!’ Kez yelled in a panic, hurling rocks as fast as she could at anything that looked vaguely insect-ish. ‘IT DIED LAST TIME!’

With a quick nod, Iscah kicked a rock up from the ground, snatched it out of the air, and hurled it with incredible speed into the canopy. Moments later, it returned to earth, followed by the crinkled remnants of an insect.

‘Netball,’ Iscah shrugged, aware of the shock on everyone’s face. ‘It never really leaves you.’

‘We’ve got a signal,’ Theo coughed, reading readings off the beacon. ‘A temporal anomaly is going to form in fifty minutes, approximately half a kilometre north of here.’

‘And a second, smaller one, south of here,’ Kez nodded. ‘Right?’

‘No, I’m only seeing—’ began Theo, until a beep stopped his sentence before it was inaccurate. ‘Huh, according to this a much smaller second rift is due to open a few kilometres south of here, ten minutes before the first.’

‘It’s just debris,’ Kez said. ‘Explosive debris at that. We should leave it be.’

‘Right …’ blinked Theo. ‘Well, I think we can get to it and back in time before—’

‘No,’ Kez said, shaking her head. ‘You can’t.’

‘Hey, I was almost track and field champion at high school,’[fn43] Theo began, but stopped at the look on Kez’s face.

‘Theo,’ she said. ‘*You* can’t.’

A cold wind weaved its way between the trees. It wasn’t why Theo shuddered.

‘I should stop with the ghost of Christmas future shit,’ Kez said apologetically. ‘I’m starting to creep myself out.’

‘Nonsense,’ Iscah said. ‘Being able to see down a path of life without committing to it is a wondrous gift.’

‘One we’d be foolish to ignore,’ said Theo. ‘We’ll head straight to the larger rift then.’

‘Kez and I will,’ said Iscah. ‘I think we need to get reacquainted, and I’m pretty sure that Theo’s dying to have a play with the DNA sampling kit that he’s hidden on his person.’

‘How did you know?!’ Theo exclaimed. Iscah just smiled and tapped her nose.

‘Come on then,’ Eureka said, clapping a bemused Theo on the back. ‘I’ll be sure to bring him back before home time.’

As the two groups split off to begin their missions, Theo turned back to offer some final words of advice.

‘Stay safe, kids. Don’t eat any brightly coloured berries or lick any amphibians.’

They wandered off, Theo still giving advice as he walked. ‘And for the sake of all that is holy, stay away from the locals, no matter how attractive they look in their loincloths. I don’t want either of you ending up as your own great-great-great-great-great …’

Iscah and Kez were well out of earshot before Theo finished his joke.

‘Random question,’ Kez asked as Iscah held a branch out of the way for her. ‘You’ve never destroyed a planet, have you?’

‘I’ve left some pretty negative reviews,’ Iscah laughed. An odd laugh, Kez noticed. Like a seal going backwards down a waterslide.

‘Any interest in archaeology?’

‘None whatsoever,’ replied Iscah.

‘Ever been to prison?’

‘Loads of times.’

Kez stopped, partially from the unexpected response, partially from the particularly grippy plant that had attached itself to her leg.

‘Loads of times?’ she asked. ‘Really?’

Iscah nodded. ‘I find that my faith conflicts with the law on an

irritatingly regular basis,' she said.

'Faith?' asked Kez, tugging her leg free. 'You're religious?'

'I'm a Wandering Divine,' said Iscah.

Kez stared back blankly, as many did at this revelation. Iscah held back her urge to point out that asking a Wandering Divine if they have faith is like asking someone married to a wheel of camembert 'do you like cheese?'. Instead, Iscah went for her usual stock answer.

'A Wandering Divine follows the path laid out to them by God. It's a solemn vow to help the less fortunate of the galaxy in any way that we can.'

'And that lands you in prison?'

'Depends how you help,' shrugged Iscah. 'There are twenty-eight known species in this galaxy who aren't yet members of the Affinity. Every now and then they reach out, asking for assistance. Food, medical supplies, shelter. Real necessities.'

'So what do you do?'

'I move about supplies,' said Iscah. 'From the people who have more than they need, to the people who don't have enough.'

'You're a thief!' Kez exclaimed, nearly falling into the small brook she was hopping over.

'Yes,' Iscah said. 'I don't want to be, but I find that bureaucracy never moves fast enough for the hungry.'

'Do you know any martial arts or anything like that?'

Iscah stopped in the centre of the brook, balancing on one leg on a small rock. Her silence may not have replied, but her eyebrows did.

'You know, like in a secret monastery … in the mountains,' Kez said, quieting down with each syllable. 'Monks … and … stuff …'

A colossal smile spread across Iscah's slightly pockmarked face. In return, Kez's decided to get ahead of the game and began to redden.

'You watch too many films,' Iscah giggled, finishing her crossing with a hop.

'So why are you here?' Kez asked. 'Jack was basically strongarmed, Eureka's lucky to be alive, and Theo … I just think he's bored.'

'Same reason as always,' Iscah said. 'Like you, I was on the list that Osheen pulled out of time's arse. Pretty direct calling from a higher power if you ask me.'

Iscah's own words caused a small burst of cold suspicion to cascade within her. She shook it off. Now wasn't the time for doubt. Kez, however, had other plans.

'You weren't on the first list,' Kez chuckled. 'How does it feel to be

God's sloppy seconds?'

'I don't know,' sniped Iscah. 'How does it feel to be the only survivor of an entire timeline? A whole universe, and it's just you left.'

A cloud darkened the area around them, gently softening the calls of the wildlife. Iscah instantly filled with regret. 'Kez …' she began, but Kez shook her head.

'Let's just walk for a bit, yeah?' she said, before trudging off silently. She made it about three steps before the beacon beeped. 'We're here,' she sighed, flopping down onto a log.

'So, we can talk now?' Iscah asked, trying her best to not smile.

Kez didn't reply. Instead she looked up, raising a threatening finger to the heavens. 'Don't pick favourites,' she said. 'It's not nice.'

Iscah joined Kez on the log, causing it to tilt ever so slightly, exposing sleeping bugs on the far side to a rude wakeup call. Kez noticed Iscah's posture, essentially a series of perfect right angles, and tried to match it. She pulled two muscles before she gave up.

'Your first universe complicates things for both of us,' Iscah said. 'For you, the uncertainty of self. Which version of you are you?'

Kez stretched out her legs, irritated that her uniform meant that she couldn't enjoy the warmth that the scattered pattern of light offered.

'I can't stop thinking about the original Kez from this universe,' she said, trying to fit complicated emotions into communicable ideas. 'Did I overwrite her? Am I her, just with new memories?'

Kez focused on a specific memory, trying to find the truth in it. She thought back to this morning. The dorm room, Osheen entering, a disguise falling, a face revealed. But whose? Memories swirled into each other, inseparable. Jack. Iscah. Both.

'I think that's a philosophy question,' Iscah said. 'You're trying to define the self.'

'What is it with you and Jack freaking me out with philosophy?' Kez chuckled. 'Next you'll be saying that we all die twice or something equally nightmare-inducing.'

Iscah looked at Kez quizzically.

'Something this old feller on the station used to say that spooked me when I was little,' Kez said. 'The first time you die is when, you know, you snuff it. The second time is when everyone who knew about you snuffs it too.'

Iscah thought about this for a moment.

She looked up towards the blue sky, eyes tightened to help with the focus. 'In that case, do your worries stem from the fact that your

memories are all that is keeping Jack from his second death?'

'Well it fucking is now,' Kez exclaimed, leaping from the log and returning the insects to darkness. She tried to remember Jack's face again. It was … bearded? She was pretty sure she remembered a beard. A great big … small …

'If it's of any solace, I have some thoughts on that philosophy of yours,' Iscah said, interrupting Kez's internal meltdown. 'Is it an interesting idea? Sure. Is it right? Nah.'

'Nah?' repeated Kez, trying to remember if Jack even had hair. 'Are you allowed to "Nah" a philosophy?'

'You can if it's rubbish,' Iscah laughed.

'Well, go on then,' Kez said, offering the floor to Iscah and her upcoming lecture. 'Hit me.'

'I don't think that anyone is ever forgotten,' Iscah began. 'Sure, names and faces fade, but the good you put into the universe remains. Look at the human race; a few hundred years ago we were threatening each other with the apocalypse, and now we work together as one. This is the kindness of the past, maintained.'

Kez shook her head.

'Nah,' she said.

'Did you just "Nah" me back?' Iscah asked. 'Philosophy is having a dreadful day.'

Kez squatted down next to Iscah. She'd sit, but she was worried she'd be judged for her terrible posture.

'If someone angry lashes out at me, then I get angry too. Don't bad emotions spread just as much as good ones?'

'Ah,' replied Iscah, 'but you're forgetting forgiveness. We can take a bad act, understand it, and move past it, nullifying the spread.'

Kez looked hard at Iscah, studying her. She was short, far too skinny for her tastes, but had almost impossibly kind features. The sort of face you'd trust implicitly, which meant that Kez would have to work twice as hard to not.

'You're really that optimistic about people?' Kez asked. 'Seriously?'

'You got a better attitude to have?' Iscah shrugged.

'Nah,' lied Kez.

'There we go then,' said Iscah, patting the log until Kez and her awful posture sat back down. 'While Jack may be gone, as long as you continue to spread his kindness, he will live forever.'

Kez took a small amount of time to wonder which bit of Jack's kindness she should spread. The blowing-up planets part, or the

attacking co-workers part.

'Enough about me,' Kez said, approaching the upcoming subject like you would a puppy in a minefield. 'Do you want to talk about … God?'

Before Iscah could speak, the beacon beeped again. Moments later a deep explosion shook the ground, sending a blanket of leaves cascading downwards, and thousands of birds into the air.

Oh thank god, Kez thought, potentially ironically.

'Well, that'll end the DNA sampling portion of the trip,' Theo chuckled, watching the local wildlife scarper from the sound of the explosion. 'Let's head back.'

'Kez really did know what was going to happen,' Eureka said, the two of them starting the small trek to the others. 'Madness, all of this.'

'I thought you'd be used to a pre-written future by now,' Theo chuckled. Eureka didn't hear him. She was too busy staring off into the distance again.

'They're fine,' Theo said kindly, giving Eureka a tiny nudge with his shoulder. 'Kez has done this before. Literally.'

'I've trained for so long to keep my crew safe, I can't help but worry,' Eureka replied, taking a calming breath. 'Especially after the *Paracosm*.'

'That must have sucked,' Theo understated.

'Yeah,' Eureka understated, staring at a spot on the forest floor, her eyes losing their focus as the forest noise faded in again. Could she say it? 'Can I tell you something?' she asked quietly.

'Of course,' said Theo kindly. 'Whatever's on your mind?'

'I …'

She couldn't say it. Saying it would make it real.

'You OK?' asked Theo.

'I accidentally went to the wrong university,' she said, physically shaking off her original thought. If Theo saw through the change, he didn't say anything.

'How did you manage that?' he asked, smile wide, hungry for historical gossip.

'I had three places I wanted to go to, and four slots to fill on the forms,' she replied, counting each one off on her fingers. 'Aldrin University for the flight school, Margaret Hamilton Institute of Technology for its starship software program, and Nancy Roman

College because, well, who doesn't love a bit of astronavigation.'

'You had no clue what you wanted to be, did you?' Theo chuckled.

'Does anyone at that age?' Eureka replied. 'All I wanted was to be a legendary space hero, meet cool aliens, and live in a house with a white picket fence, three dogs, and this lass I knew with red hair.'

'Well, nobody can deny you did the hardest two first,' Theo laughed. 'So, how did you end up going to Collins?'

'Well, I looked up when all the introductory interviews were, and only one other university had interviews before Aldrin.'

'You used it as a practice!'

'Seemed like a smart idea,' Eureka said. 'Nothing to lose, you know?'

'Genius!' Theo applauded. 'So, did you fall in love with it during the interview or something?'

Eureka bit her lip as she smiled.

'No. Lily started dating this guy …'

'Ah,' Theo nodded. 'That'll do it.'

'I lost focus, tanked my exams,' Eureka sighed. 'Collins was the only place that would accept me.'

'Well, that prick never made the history books,' Theo laughed. 'I've always thought you two were inseparable since you were kids.'

'We had a love–hate relationship,' Eureka sighed. 'I loved her, and she hated me.'

'Oh, sweetie,' said Theo softly.

'Hey, I bagged her in the end,' Eureka smiled. 'It was just complicated getting there. She took time to accept a few key details about herself.'

'Did you?'

'Loud and proud from day one. I used to watch old TV as a kid and wonder why all the girls were kissing boys when there were other girls *right there*,' Eureka laughed.

'Kissing?' Theo said, dramatically wrinkling his nose up. 'I'd turn the film off at that bit. Too many films end with kissing, not enough with making friends with a cool animal.'

'I can't work out if you're telling me you're ace, or that you're a *terrible* film critic.'

'Oh, both,' Theo giggled. 'At my age I'm just happy if I get through a movie without needing to nap.'

'Your age?' Eureka asked. 'How old are you?'

Theo grinned. 'Guess.'

Eureka looked Theo up and down. What she could see of the skin

wrapped around his scrawny frame barely had a wrinkle on it. His eyes shone bright as if they were new, which they might have been, yet she did notice a few grey hairs making their early appearance around his ears. He couldn't be older than a slightly stressed-out forty.

'Thirty-four,' Eureka said, undercutting her own deduction for the sake of social politeness.

'Way off,' said Theo with a devilish grin.

Eureka lined up her second guess, but stopped the moment she realised that the tree behind Theo had started to glow purple. From nearby, a roar started to rumble through the air.

'Alright then!' exclaimed Theo, pelting off towards the danger, Eureka in tow. 'Let's get some answers.'

Kez looked up at the fold in spacetime that was looming above them, squinting through the dark purple light that was somehow emanating from it, as her visual overlays flickered. Whatever was happening was seriously interfering with her interior circuitry.

'YOUR NPC ON THE FRITZ TOO?' Kez yelled, as she realised that every other living thing in the forest was running in the opposite direction.

'DON'T HAVE ONE,' Iscah yelled back. 'DIDN'T FINISH MY TIME SO IT'S STILL AT THE PRISON.'

Before Kez could reply, the temperature suddenly plummeted. Snow started to fall, large clumps of it sticking to her uniform. Above them, clouds were forming, freezing, and being ripped apart into snow.

'OI OI!' Theo yelled as he and Eureka ran over to the others. 'LOVELY WEATHER WE'RE HAVING.'

The two of them had barely skidded to a halt when the rift cracked open fully, splintering into the sky and falling back like the branches of a neon willow. As this dome of nonexistence finished forming, the whole planet went deathly quiet.

'What is that?' asked Eureka to nobody in particular, the right person to ask as nobody had a clue.

Theo approached the dome carefully, unsure where it even began. He reached out, but withdrew his hand suddenly. 'I can hear a voice,' he whispered.

'Whose?' asked Iscah.

Theo listened carefully, making sure he was right before answering.

‘Mine,’ he said.

He took a step forward, entering the rift. For a second he froze there, mid-breath. Then, he simply vanished.

‘THEO!’ Eureka yelled.

Kez looked at the beacon. ‘Fifty-five seconds left until we’re pulled back,’ she said, pulling the beacon closer to her chest.

‘Is he still in range?!’ Iscah asked, approaching the dome. ‘We can’t all leave him behind.’

‘You’re right,’ Eureka said, striding past her towards the rift. ‘If I don’t resurface in a few moments, you stay out here and go home.’

‘Eureka—’ Iscah began, but it was too late. She was gone too.

Seconds passed. Kez’s eyes darted from the countdown to the rift. Eureka didn’t resurface.

‘They’re not coming back,’ said Kez.

‘They might be trapped,’ replied Iscah.

‘They might be dead.’

With twenty seconds left, Iscah nodded to herself, pressed her left thumb into her right palm, and vanished into the rift. Now alone, the only human in existence, Kez gathered all of her strength, dug down deep, and realised it wasn’t enough. She couldn’t risk her own life. She just couldn’t.

The final seconds ticked down. Kez thought about the last time this had happened, when she chased Jack through this very forest. When she’d left Theo to die. She had an opportunity to save people, and twice now she hadn’t taken it. What was wrong with her?

I’m sorry, she thought. *I’m so sorry.*

With that, Kez closed her eyes, hugged the beacon tight, and waited for the future to come and pick her up. The beacon beeped, calling out across time, ready to pull Kez home. A fraction of a second before the beacon activated, it was pulled into the rapidly expanding rift along with Kez, a hazard she would have noticed had she kept her eyes open for just a moment longer.

Time wasn’t happy here, in very much the same way that water molecules aren’t happy when in a boiling kettle. It felt agitated, broken. The dome was much larger on the inside, some millions of metres wide and tall, but the outside was still visible, stretched and warped, speeding up and slowing down. Kez watched, shivering, as

monstrous creatures faded into a lake, as that lake became dry, and as the planet exploded, leaving nothing but the red-hot sun, enormous in the sky. All of time, happening at once, never happening at all. In the middle of all of this, a man.

'If you're looking for the others, you've just missed them,' said the man, bent over a heap of wires and metal. 'Well, I say just …'

'They've gone?' Kez asked with a flutter of panic. She looked at the clock of the beacon and noticed that it was changing wildly. Seconds to go, millennia, days.

'Yes, and no,' said the man, so far away, yet perfectly audible. 'They've arrived and they're not here yet. If you've not noticed, time plays silly buggers here.'

Around Kez, fractals fell into themselves, their colours folding around each other, blossoming into the very stars themselves.

'Who are you?' Kez asked, stepping towards the man, somehow covering the enormous distance between them in a single stride.

'A dead man,' he sighed, throwing the piece of charred metal he was holding onto the pile. 'Once I get this fixed.'

The man turned to face Kez. After rotating for far too long to face her, she saw that he was almost as broken as his machine. Burns, scars, and cuts crept about his body as a steady drip of blood from a chest wound fell away and floated off.

'Is that a time machine?' she asked, pointing at the metal.

'It was,' the man replied, narrowing what was left of his eyebrows. 'How did you know that?'

'I found some of it,' she said. 'A screw.'

'Debris from the crash,' nodded the man, now somehow handing the screw over to Kez. The damage to the head was there, yet it was clean, new. 'Inverse potential energy. Big bits have low energy, small bits have loads. A bug we could never fix.'

'You built the machine?' Kez asked, looking through the pieces of it that had been scattered across the floor. One cracked section of it had something etched into its bottom edge. Kez reached for it, but it suddenly wasn't there anymore.

'I just helped,' said the man, entering his completed pod, his hands shaking. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go back.'

'I came about the message,' Kez said, aware she had very little time left, if that even mattered right now. 'The warning.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about,' said the man, fear breaking through his voice as his pod started to light up.

‘Although, I do have one of my own. Whatever you do, wherever you go, if you’re able to, do the thing I never could. Kill him. Kill Austin Lang before he wipes out the universe.’

Kez’s eyes lit up. There it was. Not a warning to the future. A warning to her. The dome began to destabilise as the man’s pod sealed itself shut. Kez ran up to it, slamming both her hands on the small viewing window.

‘WHO IS AUSTIN LANG?’ she screamed, as the pod began to lift off, energy crackling through it as it rose. The man leaned against his window, looked down on Kez, and waved as the dome started to collapse.

‘I am,’ he mouthed.

Chapter Sixteen

The Universe's Second Choice

LUCAS | 2783

'They didn't make it,' Morag said, patting Kez's cold knee before drawing a blanket over her. 'Whatever happened was too much for them. I'm sorry.'

The room's tense silence grew louder. Osheen collapsed into his apparently favourite chair in the medical bay, his hands busy in what was left of his hair.

'Not one of them survived?' he asked stoically. Morag spun a monitor around, showing Osheen the results. No life signs. 'Dammit,' he sighed. 'If I had prepared more, if I had planned for this …'

'It wasn't your fault,' said Theo, softly laying a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'I made the call.'

Osheen glanced over at Theo, standing there in a white gown, light radiating around him. 'Still, I'm sorry for your loss.'

'I can't believe you two are getting teary-eyed over some DNA samples,' Kez said, shivering under her blanket as nanobots repaired various scars and burns across her skin. 'It's not like anything real died.'

'That's not true at all,' Morag said, switching off the diagnostic light above Theo's bed. 'I've just eradicated an ancient ancestor of whooping cough bacteria that Theo had caught.'

'Neat!' beamed Theo, gazing at his own hand in awe. 'I bet it was from one of the bites.'

A small draught whipped around as everyone simultaneously shook their heads.

'Can we get back on topic?' Eureka groaned, an ice pack on her head soothing the thumping pain. 'We all met Austin, right?'

The room agreed in their favourite parlance.

'Mid crash landing, as far as I could tell,' said Iscah. 'Didn't hear the message though.'

'I did,' said Kez. 'He said it to me.'

'Was that before or after he handed you this?' Osheen asked, as he rotated a transparent quarantine cube in his hand, a single screw

suspended in the middle.

'I think it was after,' Kez replied. 'If "after" was even a thing inside that dome.'

'But we never went to investigate that second rift,' Theo said. 'How did we end up with the screw from it?'

'Can I see it?' Kez asked. Osheen nodded and threw it over to her, causing three of the room's occupants to gasp as it sailed through the air. Kez caught it and began turning it over in her hands, trying to pin down what her memory was telling her. Something was different. 'It's new,' she eventually realised. 'The one from the crater was burned. This one isn't.'

'So, it's a different screw?' offered Bea.

'No,' Kez replied, wanting to shake her head but worrying that doing so would be the end of her temporal double vision. 'Same damage to the top.'

'It's from before the explosion,' said Osheen. 'By handing it to you, the second rift never happened.'

'We heard it though,' said Iscah. 'Shook the whole damn forest.'

'Then I have no idea,' Osheen sighed, catching the screw as Kez threw it back. 'I'm at a loss.'

'Let's back burner this,' Theo said. 'What's our next move?'

Osheen shrugged.

'You said you found a bunch of destinations we could safely travel to in the past,' Eureka said, her face muffled through the ice pack she had become tired of holding up to her forehead. 'Why don't we head to one of those?'

Osheen sighed and slid down further in his chair.

'We found thousands of them,' Bea said. 'Tens of thousands.'

'We're going to make thousands of trips?!' Kez exclaimed. 'What?!'

'No,' said Osheen. 'There are thousands of places in the past that use my beacon for paradox-free travel, but there might be any number of reasons for them.'

'Osheen hypothesises that future time machines may use his codes out of respect for his work,' Bea added, causing Osheen to cringe.

'Whatever the reason,' coughed Osheen, 'we need to narrow down the field to suitable targets. We need a lead.'

He stood, hands deep in his pockets as he designated more of his synapses to mulling over this issue, abandoning the conversation to free up space.

'You're welcome to leave in the meantime,' he said. 'We'll contact

you again if we have anything.'

He left the room, unaware just how happy he'd made several of its occupants.

'We can go?!' Kez asked, climbing out of the medical bed and wiping off any remaining nanobots. 'Now?'

'Sounds like it to me,' said Theo happily. 'It'll be nice to sleep in my own bed tonight. I think my apartment is still there. Been a while since I was last home.'

'Why's that?' asked Iscah.

'Something always comes up,' sighed Theo. 'Or off.'

'I'll probably stick around,' Eureka said. 'I just can't be bothered with the commute.'

'Well, I've got another few weeks of my sentence left,' said Iscah. 'Might as well go and get that finished.'

'So that's it? We're done?' Kez asked, not sure if she could trust anything positive happening to her.

Theo approached her and shook her hand. 'As your twat-above-all, the following gives me great pleasure,' he smiled. 'You're relieved of duty.'

Kez smiled back, a warm relief washing over her, just as a knock on the door announced the arrival of Alphonse.

'Alright, all! Just to let you know that the matter courier blew during the time machine's activation. We'll have it fixed by tomorrow morning.'

He smiled and vanished, unaware that at least one of the people in the room was now plotting his murder.

'One more thing,' he added, popping his head back in. 'Dinner tonight will be my take on tonkatsu. Bring your appetite and your chopsticks!'

He vanished again. After a moment, Theo shook Kez's hand.

'Welcome back,' he said.

Kez awoke later that night, desperate for a drink.

I told you, you didn't need to add that much salt to your dinner, E-NA tutted. *I thought Alphonse was going to cry*.

Kez thought some mumbles back, mostly about how they weren't talking after the technically double betrayal, before stumbling out of the dorm, baggy Affinity pyjamas giving her a ghostly silhouette in the

night lighting. The floor, despite being thinly carpeted, was cold under her feet. It reminded her of home.

Two storeys down, Kez entered the cafeteria. She passed through it, into the immaculate kitchen, and began looking for whatever cupboard held glasses. Instead, she found a cold store, full to the brim with various glass bottles full of dark liquids.

Jackpot, she thought, pulling one out at random and re-entering the cafeteria to gulp it down. It was then she realised that she wasn't alone. In the booth at the far end, cocooned in a duvet with her head pressed against the window, sat Iscah, unaware of Kez's presence.

Talk to her, said E-NA.

I'm good thanks, replied Kez, beginning her stealthy retreat, happy to polish off this bottle of mystery liquid in bed.

Talk to her or I will play the worst songs ever made, non-stop, for the rest of your life.

After a three-second example of this punishment,[fn44] Kez relented.

'I figured you might want to talk,' she said, mustering up the kindest smile she could as she approached.

Iscah jumped slightly at the unexpected voice and turned. She noted the bottle.

'What's the wine for?' she asked.

'In case you don't want to talk,' shrugged Kez.

With a flash of a smile, Iscah invited Kez to take the opposite seat in her booth. Kez sat, uncorking the bottle with her nanobots before her body had made contact with the seat.

'You know that's from my own personal cache of sacramental wine?' Iscah said.

Kez froze, the bottle already on its way to her lips.

'Sacramental? As in … ?'

'As in, this wine is part of a religious service I perform, and represents the love of God inside all of us.'

She demonstrated just how much God loved her by swiping the bottle from Kez's hands and swigging from it.

'Or,' Iscah continued, wiping her mouth on the duvet, 'it would be sacramental if I had blessed it, which I haven't. What it actually represents is the only alcohol on board that Alphonse hasn't saved for some complicated recipe.'

Kez gave a small giggle as Iscah passed the bottle back over to her. She took a sip and immediately started coughing.

'Strong stuff …' Kez sputtered.

‘Did I not mention?’ said Iscah, settling back into the perfect cushion groove she’d been working on all night. ‘God loves us *a lot*.’

Still coughing, Kez placed the bottle down on the table between them, withdrawing it again when she realised it had hit something. The surface was strewn with an entire library of thick, heavy books, many of which were open; their thin red ribbon bookmarks criss-crossing like aircraft trails above a city.

‘Light reading?’ asked Kez, carefully placing the bottle onto the windowsill.

‘Just some comforting passages,’ replied Iscah, grabbing the book closest to her and starting to read. ‘The Lord sits close to the broken, and helps those who are crushed in spirit.’[fn45]

Kez didn’t reply for two reasons. One, she was focused on making sure that the wine bottle had a stable footing on the slightly slanted windowsill, and two, she didn’t know what to say.

‘How did you …’ Kez eventually began, looking for the right word and absolutely failing to find it, ‘… start?’

‘You mean, how did I come to believe in God, the creator, protector, and father of all?’

‘Yeah,’ said Kez, now wishing that she still had a wine bottle to hide behind. ‘Thereabouts.’

Iscah snatched up the bottle and drank a good amount of love from it. ‘I’m not lucky enough to live in a universe as beautiful as ours,’ she eventually said.

Kez sat forwards.

‘That’s sad.’

‘Perhaps,’ Iscah replied. ‘I just like to think of it as acknowledging that something is a gift.’

Iscah tapped a command into a nearby wall panel and gave a small shiver that Kez recognised immediately. Iscah had just ordered local nanobots to enter her bloodstream and lend a hand to some enzymes, speeding up the metabolisation process. In about sixty seconds, there wouldn’t be a drop of alcohol left in her system.

‘Do you know what a hyperplanet is?’ Iscah asked.

‘I have literally no idea,’ admitted Kez.

‘We tend to think of the universe as static, rotating about a plane at best, but actually, it’s a snow globe out there. One that’s being shaken. Entire solar systems rocket through the nothing in any direction they please. You’ll be sitting on your planet one day, minding your own business when, suddenly, BAM, a new stellar body comes marching

through, scattering the system's planets into the void.'

'That happened to you?' said Kez, realising that Iscah had left the bottle just out of arm's reach.

'No, you wouldn't be able to survive that. But occasionally we do find one of them. A rogue planet, hurtling at near lightspeed across the galaxy. That's a hyperplanet.'

Iscah took a moment to look out of the window, towards the stars of the Milky Way.

'I grew up on one of them.'

'On a hyperplanet?'

Iscah nodded. 'My parents were planetary scientists and they found one. They came up with this mad idea to live on it and study it up close. For nineteen years it would leave charted systems as it whipped round the galactic core. They'd get on at the fringes of Affinity space, ride it screaming across the galaxy, and get off when it came back in. Mad fools.'

'How do you even live on a planet like that? No heat, no air, no resources?' wondered Kez. 'Wait. No. How do you even *land* on a planet going that fast?'

'Simple,' said Iscah, in the way that people do before describing something wonderfully complicated. 'The same way you'd kill Dracula.'

'Dracula?' asked Kez, now wishing she'd gotten the complicated answer. 'Did they drive a stake through the planet's heart or something?'

Iscah laughed. 'Mum and Dad designed a new kind of colony ship. At the top of it there was a small, self-sustaining base. Underneath that, eight miles of hardened, shielded stake. The idea was that the target planet would come along, crash into this monstrosity, and the colony would end up penetrating right down to the mantle layer of the world. If the mathematics were right, the colony itself would now be flush with the surface, and be equipped with a never ending supply of heat, and thus, power.'

Kez processed this for a short while.

'That sounds …'

'Impossible?' offered Iscah.

'I was going to go with "dangerous as all shit",' Kez laughed. 'But yeah, let's go with impossible.'

'It worked though,' continued Iscah. 'The colony landed and took root. After remote checks, my folks and a handful of other scientists

teleported on board, and together they waved off the civilised universe for almost two decades.'

'And they took you with them?' Kez quite rightly wondered.

'Ah, well,' said Iscah, shuffling into a more comfortable position. 'They didn't know I was there.'

'You were a stowaway?'

'In a manner of speaking,' Iscah shrugged.

'So what, you hid in a crate of shampoo or something?'

'No, I was hiding in a womb.'

Kez took a little too long to work that one out.

'Your mum was pregnant?' she eventually deduced.

'Yep. In all the fuss of checking her equipment, she never checked …'

'… her equipment,' said Kez, finishing the thought for Iscah.

'Exactly.'

Iscah clocked Kez eyeing the bottle and handed it over to her. As she took it, Kez couldn't help but notice the sphere embedded in Iscah's palm.

'Here,' she said, twisting the sphere slightly so that it was released from her hand, leaving a deep silver-plated recess where it had been sitting. 'Have a look.'

Kez took the sphere, handling it delicately as she admired its exquisite patterns and details. 'What is it?' she asked, passing it back to prevent herself inevitably losing it.

'It's my true mission from God,' said Iscah, placing it back into her palm. 'At any point it can open, revealing its truth to me.'

'Woah,' said Kez. 'Really?'

Iscah shrugged.

'That's what I was told anyway,' she said. 'Not sure what to think these days.'

Iscah stared back out into space. Kez made a slight move to leave, but decided against it when E-NA started blasting country rap.

'So, what's life like on a hyperplanet,' Kez asked.

'It wasn't the easiest time. No atmosphere, no sun, not a single crayon. I couldn't even play outside as there wasn't one.' Iscah drew the duvet in tighter. 'Everyone was great though, making toys for me out of discarded food packaging and that sort of thing, sharing what they were doing, letting me help with the small farms. What that planet lacked in atmosphere, it certainly made up for in love and kindness.'

For a brief moment, Kez considered talking about her own childhood onboard the station, but she shook that off as quick as she could. For now, she was here to listen.

'But,' Iscah continued, 'there's nothing like living on a suffocating, cold, and vicious rock, lightyears away from the rest of the universe with incredibly limited supplies, to make you really, really sure that you're trans.'

'Oh, that can't have been easy,' Kez said softly.

'It wasn't. I mean, everyone was incredible and supportive. Mum even offered the name Iscah if I wanted it, to make up for not quite getting it right the first time around.' Iscah glanced at something on the table. Kez followed her gaze and saw a photograph of two smiling elderly people waving back at her. 'It took me a while to come to terms with it. A long while. For some of that journey, I convinced myself that I was acting out, trying to get attention. Then, slowly, I realised who I really was.'

'You were the only kid for lightyears,' Kez said warmly. 'I think you had their attention.'

Iscah smiled and nodded, sending some of the smile her parents' way.

'Mum and Dad did their best, but there was only so much they could do. We only had the absolute basics. Just my existence on the settlement meant that they had to significantly rework all the food and water supplies. A transition? It wasn't going to happen.'

'Didn't you have a doctor on board?' Kez wondered.

'Oh yeah, Dr Bob. He was great, but we were on the most basic of supplies. He was basically just a friendly medikit with a beard, bless him.' Iscah took a moment to remember him before moving on. 'As I grew, my body started to betray who I was. Every day it would change, edging closer and closer towards something that I'm not. Something I've never been. Gender dysphoria doesn't fuck around.'

'You know, we don't have to talk about this if you don't want to,' said Kez, suddenly realising that she might be stomping through some personal boundaries here.

'It's OK,' Iscah smiled. 'I've been through a tonne of therapy, I've processed this. I wouldn't be telling you if I hadn't.'

'OK,' said Kez, her face flushing a little. 'Just checking.'

'There was this man on board,' continued Iscah. 'Adam. About my parents' age. He ran water manufacturing. So timid and softly spoken, yet built like a brick outhouse. I found him praying one day and asked

what he was doing. None of the books on board talked about faith – it would be weird if scientific textbooks and manuals did – so I had genuinely no idea. He explained to me that he believed in a god, an eternal being that created the cosmos, and that loves us.'

'… and that gave you your faith?' asked Kez.

'No, I thought he was a loon to start,' Iscah laughed. 'Then, one day I found myself curled up, crying into a pillow, you know, the usual, and I decided, what do I have to lose?'

'You prayed?'

'I talked. About me, about my life. About everything. For a few hours, I just talked.'

Iscah smiled like she'd just been told that dinner tonight was going to be her favourite meal.

'That's what faith is really, if you boil it down to its basic components. It's therapy. It's someone to talk to.'

'Faith fixed your dysphoria?' asked Kez.

'No. Actual therapy, pills, and medical procedures did that. Dad likes to joke that the moment we got off that rock, Mum teleported me directly into therapy. But faith helped during some of the dark days, and I decided to keep it up once we'd gotten back to what everyone else calls the real world.'

'Hence these,' Kez said, gesturing at the books on the table.

'Hence those,' replied Iscah. 'Not many passages about being the universe's second choice.'

'You're not—'

'I am,' Iscah said, her voice cracking. 'You're the proof. The first time around, I wasn't needed. I didn't exist. The God I love, to whom I've given my life in service, a good, kind, unknowable entity, has deemed me to be nothing more than a temporal bugfix.'

'Well …' offered Kez, way out of her depth. 'Maybe this was always going to happen. Maybe this was the plan all along?'

Iscah pressed down the sphere in her palm, as if she was trying to draw strength from it.

'If this was his plan, then I'm worshipping a deity who is happy to wipe out the entire universe to suit his needs. I'm worshipping a monster.'

Iscah looked to Kez, her eyes desperate, longing for answers. She may as well have looked at the seat she was sitting on.

'I got nothing,' Kez shrugged.

'Same,' Iscah sighed. The conversation collapsed, exhausted. For a

while, the two of them just watched the Milky Way rotate in silence.

'Do you need God?' Kez asked.

'Back to philosophy are we?'

'I mean it,' insisted Kez. 'You've been doing all sorts of good work out there, helping people, saving lives. Why do you need him?'

Iscah tapped a finger against the glass.

'Because it's cold out there.'

Kez understood, correctly, that she could never really understand.

'Now come on,' said Iscah, scootching across the seat. 'It's late and not even God can save you from how cranky a lack of sleep gets me.'

Kez laughed and stood, grabbing the almost empty wine bottle. After she'd made it fully empty, she placed it on the table behind theirs, where it clinked off two other bottles.

'Eureka, then Theo,' Iscah said, laughing as she stood and hoisted the duvet over her shoulder. 'I'm expecting Morag any minute now.'

'And Osheen with a bill for rent,' Kez chuckled.

'He is an odd duck,' nodded Iscah. 'Though, the rest of you seem like such lovely people.'

Kez remembered the forest. Holding the beacon as it counted down. Deciding to leave without them. She wasn't lovely. She was far, far from it.

'You OK?' Iscah asked, causing Kez to snap out of it.

'Just tired,' said Kez, as the two of them returned to their dorm, ready to spend the next four hours failing to fall asleep.

'In three, two, one …'

A series of sparks shot across the matter courier room, propelled by a few loud bangs and a lot of foul-smelling smoke.

'I told you to fuse the blue wire, not the red one!' Alphonse said, straining slightly from holding the entire transportation platform up on his own. From underneath, a spikey Malcolm floated out.

'It is Affinity protocol for the colour red to represent the live wires, and for the colour blue to represent neutral wires,' he said, his body sharp and irritated.

'Aye,' said Alphonse, 'But when we were wiring it in, we ran out of red wire, so we used blue.'

Malcolm froze in the air for a split second. 'Moments ago,' he said, 'when you instructed me to fuse the blue wire, was your meaning that

I fuse the wire that is coloured blue, or the wire that is supposed to be coloured blue?'

'Supposed to be.'

'And what colour is that?'

'Green!' Alphonse explained, like it was the most obvious thing in the universe. 'In some parts it's yellow though, after we ran out of green.'

Malcolm folded himself into a shape too obscene to describe, then shot back under the pad.

'SOME OF IT MIGHT BE BROWN!' Alphonse shouted after him.

'Is this going to take much longer?' Kez asked from the chair she'd dragged in from another room. 'I'm pretty sure we have shorter lifespans than you lot and I'd rather not have to rely on you to organise my funeral.'

I could do it, said E-NA internally. Kez ignored her.

'Another couple of minutes, tops,' said Alphonse, switching the tilted platform over to his other shoulder. 'No more than that.'

Another bang. More smoke.

'Not much more than that,' Alphonse smiled weakly.

'You think we'll ever hear about this again?' Theo asked from his sitting position atop a suitcase that he'd found and called dibs on. 'We were the first time travellers you know.'

'Second,' said Eureka. 'You're forgetting me.'

'Third,' said Kez. 'You're forgetting Austin.'

'Yeah,' yawned Theo. 'Probably not worth bothering with then.'

'Osheen's determined,' Iscah said. 'He's got a fire in his eyes. We'll all be back before too long.'

'You know what I don't understand,' Theo said. 'Why doesn't he just go back in time himself? I understand that sending an alien back in time could cause problems, but why did he need us?'

'If I was him, no power in the universe could stop me from lobbing myself into that machine,' said Eureka. 'I can't see why he wouldn't go.'

'That's an easy one,' Alphonse grunted matter-of-factly. 'Old bastard's dying.'

The majority of the people in the room shifted uncomfortably.

'He's what?' asked Theo.

'Some experiment he did way back when,' said Alphonse, shifting his feet further apart to balance the weight. 'His cells are fucked. I can't remember the details, but that's what Bea is for. She's monitoring him

externally, twenty-four seven. If he's disconnected from her, he'll die in a minute. With her, he's got a few years left.'

'That's awful,' said Iscah, instinctively raising her hand for a prayer, but catching herself. 'No wonder he's rushing through this.'

'So his condition stops him from travelling?' asked Theo.

'Can't risk it,' nodded Alphonse, shaking the platform slightly. 'If Bea is lost, damaged, or what have you, then he's kaput.'

Malcolm suddenly shot out of a different part of the matter courier than he'd entered.

'I am able, despite disagreeing with some of the specific details, to confirm the story that Alphonse is telling,' he said. 'Osheen suffers from the same condition that killed his wife, Emma.'

'What happened?' asked Theo.

'They worked together, attempting to find a way to safely eliminate the electrostatic forces between subatomic particles,' Malcolm said. 'Their ultimate goal was to create a wearable device that allowed the user to pass through solid matter as if it was air.'

'So what happened?' Theo asked.

'They were unsuccessful,' said Malcolm.

'Bloody thing backfired didn't it,' Alphonse said, slamming the platform back into place. 'Took them apart at the cellular level.'

'Atomic level,' corrected Malcolm.

'Potato, tomato,' nodded Alphonse. 'Basically, they started to break apart from the inside out, their atoms slowly fizzing away. They were clever, mind, managed to slow the process for long enough to come up with a solution. Osheen dragged his old external NPC shell out of mothballs, and their assistant, Bea, offered to load herself into it. With only a few minutes left, they switched it on and … it worked! Bea was able to keep them both alive.'

'However, Bea was running at maximum capacity,' noted Malcolm.

'Oi, string bean!' barked Alphonse. 'Who's telling this story, me or you?'

Malcolm floated quizzically. 'According to my calculations, I am retelling the events to a much higher accuracy than—'

'Anyway,' interrupted Alphonse. 'They needed to come up with a solution before Bea was burned out, and Emma did, bless her.'

'What did she do?' asked Iscah.

'Only thing she could do,' Alphonse said solemnly. 'She left. Walked away to save him. He never saw her again.'

'That's heart-breaking,' said Eureka.

Kez nodded in agreement, trying to force the pieces of her heart back together with pure stubbornness.

‘Is that why you’re here, Alphonse?’ Theo asked. ‘To support Osheen?’

‘I noticed your pips when you picked me up,’ nodded Iscah. ‘You could be running a small fleet with credentials like that.’

‘No, I … had an incident,’ Alphonse said, lava rushing into his cheeks. ‘Got a bit angry and decided to make my point by reverting to my natural state.’

‘That doesn’t sound too bad,’ said Theo.

‘I was in a submarine at the time,’ he winced. ‘If it wasn’t for the escape pods …’

Malcolm spiralled himself down into a seated position and rubbed a tendril on his friend’s head in comfort. ‘My misdiagnosis of a mendelevium housing leak caused months of repairs and my expulsion from the Fibril Blue homeworld,’ he said, sloshing slowly to and fro. ‘Osheen was the only person in the galaxy who wanted me after that.’

‘So we’re all just a bunch of disasters …’ said Theo.

‘… working for one,’ finished Alphonse.

With a final bang and a spark, the matter courier pad lit up, ready to send everyone home.

‘That’s more like it!’ cheered Alphonse, slamming it down as gently as he could. ‘Who’s heading off first?’

Everyone raised their hands. Part of the pad burst into flames that Alphonse had to stamp out. By the time he was done, only one hand remained up.

‘Theo it is!’ Alphonse beamed, preparing the jump coordinates. ‘Wolf 359 was it?’

‘That’s me,’ Theo replied as he hugged the room and hopped up onto the pad. ‘Cosy little apartment that I’m pretty sure is still there. Not a lot of sun but, well, that’s 359 for you.’[fn46]

‘Alright then, here we go, laddie,’ said Alphonse with a cheery wave. ‘See you when I see yo—’

Suddenly, Osheen burst into the room.

‘I HAVE A LEAD!’ he yelled, his voice far higher than normal. ‘Malcolm, I require your assistance! Everyone else, prepare for an excursion!’

The door slid shut as he sped off, Malcolm squeaking through the gap at the last second. After the excitement was far away enough from the room, Theo stepped off the platform.

‘Welcome back,’ said Kez, offering him a hand to shake.

Chapter Seventeen

Mud Bath

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The tension in the cafeteria was thick enough to crush a knife. Osheen and Bea had set up a briefing in their usual booth but, aside from Theo, the rest of the group were scattered to the four winds. Eureka sat on her own stool, Iscah stood, gazing out of the window, and Kez was in the next booth along, sitting on the back of the seat, her scowl towering over Osheen. She didn't know why she was still here, as there was nothing he could offer that she'd take over leaving.

'What do you know about the planet Aradisi?' Osheen asked the group.

Kez leapt forward, bounding over a table and landing on the seat next to Theo. She leaned forward, eyes terrifyingly alive. 'Don't you fucking dare,' she snarled.

'So, what's this awful planet famous for?' Eureka asked with a groan. 'Is it about to explode? Is it where hatred comes from? Oh, I know! Is it normal, but the grass is made of centipede legs?'

'What's wrong with centipede legs?' asked Theo.

'Tell me that you'd enjoy a picnic on a field of tiny, wiggly legs,' Eureka scoffed.

'Yes,' said Theo genuinely. 'I would love that.'

'There is something deeply wrong with you,' Eureka replied, turning her attention back to the hovering gem on Bea's projection. 'What's with the diamond?'

'That diamond *is* Aradisi,' Kez said.

'Correct,' said Osheen, as he clicked on through slides of simulations and science, never lingering long enough for anyone to read the impeccably researched details. 'Aradisi began life as a supermassive planet,' he explained. 'At its peak, it was almost the size of a main sequence star. At some point, it collapsed, crushing its core down into a planet-sized diamond. It's a geological phenomenon.'

'It's a death planet,' said Theo grimly. 'If you take one step into its landscape, you'll be suffocated, crushed under the intense gravity, then sliced into ribbons by the razor-sharp rocks.'

‘You shut your mouth,’ Kez said, dramatically waggling a finger at Theo. ‘Osheen, please tell me we’re going there. I’ve been wanting to go there since I was little.’

Osheen nodded. Kez made a squeaking noise that E-NA immediately leapt on, but Kez muted her and carried on being excited.

‘I’m confused,’ said Eureka. ‘If it’s a death trap, why does Kez suddenly want to go?’

‘It houses a spa,’ said Iscah, wandering over to the group. ‘Hundreds of them actually, all built for different types of relaxation.’

‘Which one are we going to, Osheen?’ Kez said, almost reaching over the table and strangling the information out of him. ‘Does it have a Kneipp Bath? A Vichy shower? Lava Shell Massages?!’

‘The FO Ultra-Wellness Centre,’ Osheen said, filing through notes in a panic. ‘Apparently it’s very nice.’

‘Fantastic!’ Kez exclaimed, climbing out of the booth. ‘Come on, let’s go, universe to save et cetera.’

‘FO?’ asked Theo. ‘Female only?’[fn47]

‘I believe so,’ nodded Osheen. ‘The disguises will get you in, just be a gentleman and avert your eyes if needs be.’

‘On my honour,’ said Theo, holding up a hand.

‘Stop talking,’ said Kez impatiently. ‘I have always wanted to go to Aradisi, and the only thing stopping us from leaving now is all this talking.’

‘I’ve already been,’ shrugged Iscah. ‘It’s … nice enough.’

‘You’ve been to Aradisi? Why didn’t you tell me this?!’ Kez asked, appalled.

‘We’ve known each other for two days,’ Iscah said.

‘Lead with it,’ replied Kez.

‘Where is this planet?’ Eureka asked. ‘I thought you’d only checked Earth for signals with that satellite … Noble?’

‘Novus,’ corrected Osheen. ‘It scanned the entire Sol system, mostly because that was less faff than tracking Earth’s orbit.’

‘It’s been a while since I took astronomy 101,’ said Eureka, slightly sick of receiving two questions with every answer, ‘but I’m pretty sure that there wasn’t a diamond planet in the solar system.’

‘There wasn’t.’

‘And there is now?’

‘No.’

‘Should I stop asking questions so that you can explain it?’

‘That would be best.’

‘Right you are.’

‘Aradisi,’ Osheen explained, ‘moves.’

‘Underselling it a bit there,’ said Kez, who Eureka was now sure owned some ‘Planet Aradisi’ merch. ‘Every four years the Affinity teleport it to a different home system, customising all the resorts for that particular species! It was at Earth just before I was born, and won’t be back for another nine years!’

‘You can teleport entire planets?!’ Eureka exclaimed.

‘No, we can teleport one,’ chuckled Osheen. ‘The chemical makeup of Aradisi stops it from falling to bits during a jump, otherwise all you’re doing is suddenly giving a system a new, relaxing asteroid belt.’

‘What’s the lead you mentioned back in the matter courier room?’ asked Theo. ‘Or are we just knocking the time travelling on its head and going on holiday?’

‘It’s this,’ Osheen said, holding out the screw that Kez was handed by Austin, still floating in its transparent box. ‘An unremarkable screw, or so we thought. Earlier today, Malcolm noticed that it is absolutely *drenched* in a quantum backwash.’

‘Gross,’ muttered Kez.

‘English please, Professor,’ Theo said, failing to hold a straight face. Kez wondered how many times he’d asked to be taken to someone’s leader.

‘A demonstration would be easiest,’ Osheen said, setting the screw down on the table. ‘Would you all please close your eyes.’

All eyes remained firmly open.

‘It’s safe,’ Osheen said. ‘Trust me.’

No eyelid in the room even flickered.

‘It is safe,’ said Bea, floating between Osheen and the screw. ‘Promise.’

Everyone closed their eyes. Osheen grumbled slightly before closing his.

‘Thank you,’ he said after a few seconds. ‘You may now open them.’

‘It’s … still there,’ said Eureka, gazing somewhat disappointedly down at the screw.

‘Yes,’ agreed Osheen, the glint of the cafeteria lights on the box being outshone by the one in his eye. ‘But for a time, it wasn’t. Play it back.’

Bea shone a holographic recording of the last few seconds over the table. The moment the last pair of eyes closed, something bizarre happened.

‘The hell?’ asked Kez.

‘Interesting,’ said Iscah.

‘Zoom in,’ said Eureka.

‘Enhance!’ exclaimed Theo, earning him a full set of dirty looks.

The screw was flickering. In some frames it was there, in others, not. The instant that eyes fell on it again, it returned to its normal state.

‘Freaky,’ said Eureka. ‘Why’s it doing that?’

‘I only have theories for the moment,’ said Osheen, waving the recording away. ‘I believe that this screw exists in two states at once. There is the version that was handed over to Kez, this one here, and there is the version that you heard crash land back on Earth. Somehow, Austin’s actions have split the very destiny of this screw. It was simultaneously involved in the crash, and not, at the same time.’

‘Why does it flicker then?’ Eureka asked, squinting at the screw to see if she could make it vanish.

‘When not being observed by a consciousness, it exists in both states at once. Here, and back on Earth. Alive, and dead. When we observe it, we lock it into existence, right here, right now.’

‘Like Schrödinger’s cat,’ said Iscah.

‘Exactly,’ laughed Osheen. ‘It turns out that Von Neumann–Wigner was right! Consciousness does indeed cause wave function collapse! Suck it, Hugh Everett!’

As the room attempted a laugh at a reference they didn’t understand, Kez groaned and slammed a fist onto the table, jostling the cube.

‘Enough science,’ she said, teeth painfully gritted. ‘Explain how this takes me to Aradisi, now.’

‘Right-o,’ gulped Osheen. ‘This screw is intrinsically linked with the damaged one back on Earth, calling out to it across time. We can cross reference that call with our codes from Novus, and …’

Kez clenched a fist. Osheen heard her muscles creak under her skin.

‘We found three locations with debris from the crash,’ he sputtered. ‘Aradisi is the first.’

‘Austin travelled more than once?’ asked Iscah.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Osheen, happy to break eye contact with Kez. ‘Likely this is just debris from the initial explosion in Lake Bosumtwi.’

‘How did debris from an explosion on Earth end up on other worlds?’ asked Theo.

‘Orbits,’ summarised Osheen neatly. ‘The closest gravitational pull when a piece of debris falls out of time might be a different world, causing the rift to form there.’

‘Well, wouldn’t the majority of them end up in the sun?’ asked Eureka.

‘There was a massive explosion and we only found four pieces of debris,’ said Osheen. ‘Safe to say, most of the rifts opened on or in the sun.’

‘Alright,’ said Theo. ‘So best case scenario we capture a few more bits of trash. Then what?’

‘We use the trash’s unique energy to triangulate the original launch point of Austin’s time machine,’ said Osheen. ‘Collect the remaining three, and we can find him in both time and space.’

‘Spa first though, right?’ snarled Kez.

‘Yes, Kez,’ Osheen conceded. ‘Spa first.’

Warning lights flashed as the time machine began its thunderous powering-up sequence.

‘Forty-five seconds until departure,’ Osheen’s voice said, crackling over speakers. ‘Then two hours, sixteen minutes until we pull you back.’

‘I can work with that,’ said Kez, watching E-NA depart to the safety of a local hard drive. ‘A couple of specialty massages, twenty minutes in a salt sauna, and a quick dip in the pool.’

‘We do have a mission to accomplish while we’re there,’ said Theo.

‘Sure, sure,’ said Kez, too busy picturing herself on a lounger to listen. ‘What year are we heading to?’

‘It’s in the briefing notes,’ said Iscah. ‘Did you not read them?’

‘We get briefing notes?’ asked Kez.

‘Yes, you do,’ crackled Osheen’s slightly disappointed voice. ‘Twenty seconds.’

‘We’re landing in 2234,’ said Theo. ‘Fifty-nine years into Eureka’s future.’

‘I’ll be 100!’ Eureka exclaimed. ‘Let’s have a party!’

‘Shots!’ yelled Kez, as Eureka joined in with her, the two of them jumping up and down, hands on each other’s shoulders, chanting as the final seconds ticked away.

In the control room, two pieces of information snapped together in Osheen’s head, like magnets that had been edging towards each other for a while. He slammed the intercom button.

‘JUST REMEMBER TO NOT GET THE DISGUISES—’

With a final, deafening harrumph, the machine stole his team away and pelted them into the past.

'… wet,' Osheen sighed.

'Shots!' Kez chanted for a final time, before realising she was back in the space between destinations.

'Hey,' said Eureka, shivering under the gaze of the two things. 'I've been here before.'

'Eureka?' asked Kez.

'Kez?' replied Eureka.

'Where are we?'

'I don't know.'

'Where are you?'

'I don't know that either,' said Eureka, reaching out and around to find Kez. 'You sound like you're here but I can't touch you.'

'AHHH!' screamed Kez.

'What?'

'I can't touch me either!' Kez said, a hand she couldn't see passing through a body that was equally unobservable. Moments later, while realising that her hand could pass through itself, a sharp tug pulled Kez and Eureka away.

'FINALLY,' grumbled one of the things, happy to return to his peaceful nothing.

PLANET ARADISI | 2234

While the Ultra-Wellness Centre wasn't the most exclusive resort on Aradisi, it did boast eighteen floors of pools, restaurants, and those little tables with a hole for your face in. It was housed in a colossal shard of diamond that erupted from the planet at a forty-five-degree angle, with small sections of white walls jutting out here and there, as a thin waterfall crashed down from its point into a perfectly transparent pool. It was, quite simply, breath-taking.

'Eh,' grumbled Theo, stepping off the exterior welcome pad and tapping his disguise on. Within half a second he was wrapped in a stocky brunette who herself was wrapped in a fluffy white dressing gown.

‘It’s incredible …’ gawped Kez, gazing up at the looming, sparkling façade.

‘No more so than your disguise,’ Theo said, catching an eyeful of Kez’s new, wrinkled posterior. ‘Grandma isn’t shy.’

‘That looks less like a bathing suit and more like you’ve misapplied floss,’ said Eureka, realising that her disguise had created actual pockets in her fake dressing gown. She plucked a virtual hair from her head, watching it fizz away the moment it detached.

‘Oh, wow!’ said Kez, turning from Eureka’s demonstration to inspect her new form. ‘I don’t think I could be more conspicuous.’

‘I think mine is worse,’ said Iscah, frantically tapping at her neck, her face very much still hers. ‘It’s not working.’

‘You’re kidding,’ sighed Theo, heading back towards her and inspecting the tech. Sure enough, no amount of taps or prods could activate it.

‘Dead?’ Eureka asked.

‘As a doorknob,’ Theo confirmed. ‘This complicates matters.’

‘What’s security like here?’ Iscah asked, her eyes following the winding path up to the entrance, checking each pillar, topiary, and stick of bamboo for cameras.

‘Once you’re inside, heavy surveillance in the reception,’ said Theo, referencing the briefing across his vision. ‘Nothing beyond that.’

‘Avoidable?’

‘Not unless you can turn invisible.’

Iscah kicked a decorative pebble into a fountain that featured a urinating Besalt.

‘Couldn’t we just wipe the CCTV?’ asked Eureka. ‘It has to be stored somewhere.’

‘No good,’ said Iscah. ‘It’ll be backed up to a satellite. These things always are.’

‘No satellites!’ Theo said, snapping his fingers. ‘Aradisi moves! They’ll have to store everything on-world, or they’ll leave it behind each jump.’

‘Local only?’ grinned Iscah, happy to be infiltrating instead of relaxing. ‘Easy peasy.’

‘Great work, team,’ Theo said, distributing a couple of high fives. ‘We’ll be in, out, and gone without leaving a trace. Even the ghosts won’t remember us.’

Everyone nodded in agreement, except for Kez, who was already at reception, octogenarian arse hanging out of the world’s smallest

swimsuit, downing her body weight in complimentary cocktails.

If Amelia had eyebrows to raise, the latest visitors to stroll up to her reception desk would have sent them soaring into the air like dandelion seeds on a blustery day. Still, visitors were visitors, and the microscopic movements of her roots against one of her million control fibres sent the following text to her display.

'Good morning. How many bags will you be checking in today?'

'None,' Theo smiled over a wildfire of scented candles.

'None?' enquired Amelia, the smile on her display unfailing.

'We've got everything we need on us,' Theo said.

Amelia's little robotic body shuffled to the side to glance past Theo. Behind him, three women waited. One also in a dressing gown, another in a complicated full-body jumpsuit, and the last flaunting about a square inch of fabric across her entire, sagging body. The room fell silent, or about as silent as you can get with two crashing waterfalls and a sound system wafting neo-new-age music around the place.[fn48] A nearby sensor detected the tension and, in an attempt to keep the spa a place of relaxation, released a metric shit tonne of calming lavender scent into the air. It did it again when the receptionist's computer beeped a displeased-sounding beep.

'I'm sorry, madam, I cannot find you on my system,' she said, the smile on her display gone, unwarranted for non-guests.

'Impossible,' cried Theo, losing himself a little too much in the character. 'I checked the booking this very morning.'

Amelia glanced back at the computer again, tapping at it with her tiny, circular appendages. Slowly, she leaned forward, and beckoned Theo to do the same.

'Perhaps you reserved with us under an … alternative name,' her display whispered, the lettering dimmer than before.

Theo, unsure exactly what Amelia meant, watched in the corner of his vision as his NPC finally cracked its way through the resort's firewall. He began adding their names as quickly as he could.

'Austin Lang!' Theo suddenly laughed, causing a nearby bellhop to jump slightly. 'Of course! My husband, he made the reservation.'

Amelia searched for the reservation again, Theo filling it in as quickly as he could.

'Ah, there we are,' she said, the digital smile returning. 'Two weeks

was it?'

'Yes,' said Theo, having selected the majority of the default options. 'Two weeks.'

'And no bags?'

Theo gulped, while desperately pretending he hadn't.

'No bags,' he croaked.

Amelia froze for a moment, before waving away the bellhop and proceeding with the welcome. From the centre of the reception desk, a small cherry blossom began to sprout, grow, and bloom in seconds. One of its branches snaked out slightly, four translucent blue rings forming as its fruit.

'These are your keyrings,' Amelia explained, plucking them before handing them out. 'They will give you access to your room, as well as allowing our highly trained staff to find you at a moment's notice should you have a request.'

Kez twisted her ring. Seconds later a waiter appeared, another complimentary cocktail balanced on a silver platter.

'Well then,' Amelia concluded. 'Sophia, Rose, Dorothy, and Blanche, all that remains is for me to welcome you to the Ultra-Wellness Centre. From all of us here, we wish you an incredibly pleasant stay.'

The group bowed, curtsied, finger-gunned, and thanked Amelia, before walking around her, towards the bright silver lift doors at the far end of the reception. Amelia watched them go, her smile vanishing the second they were out of sight.

'Austin Lang?' Kez asked as the lift continued to ascend. 'Really?'

'It was the first name to pop into my head,' Theo shrugged.

'Why not *yours*!?'

'This doesn't look like a Theo Garnett sort of place,' he said, indicating the transparent diamond back of the elevator, as it continued to reveal floor after floor of luxury.

'That was a flower …' Eureka said, still blown away by her first meeting with a Tectato. 'A little blue flower, in a little box, talking to us.'

'Dorothy is having a hard time processing an alien,' Iscah said, patting her on the back.

'I love that you got the reference,' Theo beamed, before pointing at himself. 'Sophia.'

‘Oh, of course,’ Iscah said, before throwing a thumb her own way. ‘Blanche.’

‘What the fuck are you two talking about?’ asked Kez.

Theo and Iscah looked at her, before both mouthing ‘Rose’ at each other and giggling.

‘Penthouse,’ whispered the lift seductively, as it slowly pulled to a stop. The silver doors slid open, revealing a room that would drive any sane person to speechlessness.

‘Fuck me!’ yelled Kez.

‘There,’ said Amelia, tapping the frozen recording from one of many discreet cameras in the reception area. ‘I think these are the four you’re looking for.’

The large man at the desk leaned forward, his heavily scarred face illuminated by the bank of monitors.

‘The booking was seemingly made as they were standing there,’ she continued, hopping down from his desk. ‘No bags. Names from an old TV show. Dodgy if you ask me.’

The large man leaned even closer, the static from these ancient monitors reaching out and tickling his nose.

‘Thank you for bringing this to my attention,’ he said calmly, in a voice that sounded both sinister and far away.

‘And the reward?’ Amelia asked.

The large man turned to her slowly. He opened a drawer and pulled out her husband, potted and unconnected, his soil dry. The man rubbed his index finger on the underside of a leaf before handing him over.

‘You may go,’ he said, before turning back to his work.

Amelia nodded and left, finally processing carbon dioxide again. She was going to go home, reconnect her husband to his control fibres, wait for her kids to be dropped off from the nursery, then take them all on a ship to the furthest star she could find. She didn’t know that she’d put the entire universe at risk, but even if she did, that wouldn’t have changed her choices today.

Kez watched from the penthouse balcony as the sun set slowly behind the jagged, crystalline mountains of Aradisi. She took a sip from a glass

full of alcohol and leaves, and sighed blissfully for the third time that minute.

'You were right about this place,' Eureka said from the lounger next to Kez's. 'It's perfection.'

As the sun dipped below the tallest of the diamond mountains, the sky erupted with the best lightshow on this or any other world. The full spectrum of white light split apart and filled the sky with intense colour, like every rainbow in the universe, all at once. This would have been the most beautiful thing Kez had ever seen but, due to an imperfect, wobbly orbit, this light show happened every few minutes. The first time she saw it, she almost wept. This time, she was annoyed she couldn't read her magazine as easily. Humans. Nobody gets bored faster.

Behind the pair, the door to the balcony slid open.

'Nice night,' Theo said, falling into the remaining pillowy lounger.

'I think it's morning,' Kez said, pointing her magazine at the mountain range. Sure enough, the sun was slowly creeping back up, draining the colours from the sky.

'Damn,' Theo grunted. 'Too early for a drink then?'

Eureka picked up her glass of foliage and wiggled it slightly. 'Never!'

Theo dragged himself out of the lounger and headed over to the drinks dispenser by the wall. 'Something blue and cocktail-y please, you wonderful bastard of a machine.'

With a clunk and a whir, an odd-shaped glass rose up. Nozzles emerged, and blue liquid shot out from three separate directions into the glass, followed by several straws and endless fruit. Perfect. Theo headed back, only to be stopped by Iscah, who had now taken his seat.

'Where's mine?' she asked with a cheeky grin that Theo was sure had saved her life on more than one occasion.

'What would you like?'

Iscah stared off into the heavens for a moment, searching for inspiration.

'Something green and red,' she replied.

'Top green, bottom red?'

'Left green, right red.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Theo chuckled, turning back to the machine.

'Everything sorted, you two?' Eureka asked, leaning around Kez's magazine to talk to Iscah.

'Security room found, route planned, backups prepped just in case,' nodded Iscah. 'Should be a doddle.'

‘Proper backups?’ asked Eureka. ‘Or are you just flinging yourself out of the nearest window?’

‘Wouldn’t recommend that,’ Theo said, fiddling with the drinks machine’s advanced settings. ‘The gravitational field around this planet is thirty times stronger than Earth’s gravity, and there’s no air to slow you down.’

Iscah grabbed a magazine from the nearby stack, threw it up into the air, and caught it.

‘Seems alright to me.’

‘Here? Sure,’ nodded Theo. ‘But you go thirty, maybe fifty centimetres out there, past the walls and windows, beyond the range of the gravity generators, and you’ll be crushed in a heartbeat.’

Theo looked around for a prop but couldn’t find anything. With a shrug, he downed his drink and threw the glass over the railing of the balcony. It flew for a tiny moment, before plummeting to the ground in the blink of an eye, the sound of its obliteration unable to fight the intense gravity.

‘Best to stay indoors then,’ Eureka whistled.

‘Do you mind?’ Kez snapped suddenly, slapping her magazine down onto her lap. ‘I’m trying to read.’

‘I’m sure you’ll crack it one day,’ Theo laughed as he handed Iscah a drink, one side red, one side green.

‘Wrong way,’ she said. ‘I think you’ll find I asked for green on the left.’

Wordlessly, Theo spun Iscah’s glass 180 degrees in her hand, sending a splash of alcohol sailing onto the floor. The floor detected the spill and absorbed it with a small slurp, ferrying it off into the colossal maze of waste pipes hidden below. Iscah and Theo watched this little miracle of technology, before turning their attention back to a still fuming Kez.

‘Why do you want to read anyway?’ Theo asked, leaning against the balcony. ‘I thought you came here to relax.’

‘I am relaxing,’ Kez replied. ‘These articles are scientifically designed to be as mentally untaxing as possible.’

‘If you’re not reading, you’re thinking,’ said Eureka.

‘Exactly,’ said Kez, reopening her magazine to an article about living on a tiny street in Leith. ‘It’s therapeutic.’

‘When did therapeutic start to mean relaxing?’ Iscah asked, rattling the ice cubes around her immediately empty glass. ‘Therapy should be like vomiting. It makes you feel better, but it’s an awful experience.’

Theo chuckled, nodding in agreement.

'You should start a spa based on awful experiences,' he said. 'Instead of a sauna, you work up a sweat being chased around the resort by a murderer.'

'Yet it wouldn't be as awful as the plunge pool afterwards,' Iscah said. 'Nothing says relaxing like simulating falling through ice.'

'Too awful? We'll cut it,' Theo giggled. 'So, that's a yes to the chainsaw, and a no to the ice water. Anything else?'

'Massages,' said Eureka. 'But the hole you put your face in is over a massive cliff.'

'So all you can see is a ruddy great drop?' asked Theo. 'You'd tense up! It would be like massaging a brick.'

'You're not thinking it through!' said Eureka. 'If someone could massage that level of tension out of you …'

'… best massage of your life!' finished Iscah.

The three of them fell about laughing, their howls flying over the balcony and dissolving into the vacuum beyond, a moment that was almost immediately ruined by the beacon beeping from the room behind them.

'Job's up,' Theo said, as the four of them re-entered the penthouse, Kez throwing the magazine aggressively onto her now abandoned lounger as she left. Theo picked up the beacon and compared its readings with a map projected from his keyring. 'Our next delivery is getting to us in roughly fifteen minutes, eight floors down.'

'Let's head out then,' Kez said, leading the group to the elevator. 'Mission time!'

Nobody moved. The only thing to follow her was the gaze of her peers.

'Fine,' she said. 'They have these massage robots down there that are banned in our time just because a few people with weak backs didn't read the instructions. Now, come on. We literally haven't got all day.'

'I'll get the next one,' said Iscah, chauffeuring everyone but herself into the elevator. 'Meet you back up here before home time.'

'Don't stay out too late,' Theo said, following Eureka and Kez out of the penthouse. 'And don't talk to any strangers!'

'Don't worry about me,' grinned Iscah, starting to stretch. 'This is what I do best.'

Theo would have replied, but Kez's rampant pressing of lift buttons caused the doors to slam shut in his face.

The large man rewound the footage, watching again as the skinny fellow picked up the device from the white marble countertop. He zoomed in, expanding the video until a pixelated image of the device filled the screen.

With a grunt, he slid a hand into his jacket pocket, withdrawing a neatly folded piece of paper. He held it up next to his monitors, comparing the device on the screen with the sketch on the paper. He leaned forward, picking up a comms device from his desk, and flicked it on with a burst of static.

'It's them,' he said. 'Move in at your own discretion.'

If there was one thing that Theo believed in, it was context. If somebody or something was acting up, he always tried to think of the reasoning behind it. Maybe the guy who snapped at you had just lost a parent. Maybe the creature that tore your arm off was just hungry. Maybe the table that just crashed into your shin was actually put there by you in the first place. Lifeforms, Theo thought, were good overall, which is why it was so unusual that he wanted to throttle the woman talking to him all the way to death, and then some.

'So, to cut a long story short,' the tall woman said for the third time this story, 'he killed himself not long after!'

The woman, she'd said her name but Theo had forgotten it deliberately as an act of rebellion, hooted with laughter, her spindly hands wrapped several times around a drink that visibly steamed from its alcoholic contents.

'Funny,' Theo said, almost biting his tongue clean off.

'Of course, we managed to fudge his record a bit,' the woman continued, unaware that her entire audience of one was a single step away from having her euthanised. 'Bit of stealing from the company here, a few extra times late there, and suddenly, no compensation for the wife!'

More hooting. Theo wondered if there was any judge in the galaxy who would convict him. Mercifully, before Theo tested his theory, the woman's comms device rang.

'Excuse me, I must get this,' she said, rolling off her lounger onto her pencil-thin legs and striding away across the pool area, like a hateful pair of scissors.

'Take your time,' Theo said, flicking a rude gesture as she

disappeared around the door. ‘Better yet, never come back.’

‘Who’s the prick?’ Kez asked from two loungers away, her back being manipulated like you wouldn’t believe by a robot that looked like an inside-out carwash. Theo frowned, hoping she wasn’t damaging her uniform.

‘A forgotten woman,’ he said. ‘Nothing more.’

‘I thought we’d be done with greed by now,’ Eureka said disappointedly. ‘A hundred and seventy years of zero scarcity, and people like her still exist.’

‘Mercifully, she’s the last of a dying breed,’ said Theo. ‘Then again, it was never about scarcity. Earth could have fed, clothed, and housed its entire population by the twentieth century, yet it took hundreds of years more. Why?’

‘Power,’ said Eureka.

‘Bastards,’ corrected Theo. ‘Utter, contemptable bastards who hoarded wealth for no reason other than to hoard it.’

‘Money,’ nodded Kez into her pillow. ‘I learned about it in history. Those metal circles and paper squares. You used to swap them for bread or goats.’

‘Those were the two, yeah,’ giggled Eureka. ‘It’s comforting to know that all that shite is history.’

‘Yet here we are,’ exclaimed Theo, leaping to slippered feet and indicating the translucent diamond walls. ‘Greed’s last stand. We shouldn’t be celebrating this place in our time. We should be throwing it into the sun.’

In an attempt to calm himself, Theo took a lap around the otherwise mercifully empty room, circumnavigating the crystal-clear pool in the middle. He longed to throw himself into it, to shatter its glasslike surface, and to just float, staring up at the ridiculous amount of bamboo that made up the ceiling, hoping that the water would cool off this sudden mood he found himself in.

As Theo walked passed the icy plunge pool that sat between the glass sauna doors, a beep emitted from his dressing gown.

‘Finally,’ he said, muting the beacon with a jab and heading back to his team.

‘Pass,’ Kez moaned, as she used the last of her nanobots to increase the length of the straw on her nearby drink, making the effort of lifting it from the table a thing of the past.

‘Come on, Kez,’ Theo said, making sure to not aim his annoyance at innocent bystanders, yet taking a small amount of joy in flicking off

her e-masseuse as he walked by. Kez didn't reply. She just groaned an elongated groan until Eureka switched her robot back on again.

'If we die, we'll come get you,' Eureka said. Kez, still face down on the lounger, gave a wilted thumbs up.

'Ten seconds,' said Theo, confirming the time on the beacon. 'Be prepared for anything.'

'Anything?' asked Eureka. 'How?'

'Oh,' said Theo, weighing up the words for the first time. 'I dunno. Bend your knees?'

As Eureka prepared for anything, the rift opened, flinging a hunk of time machine into the universe with explosive force. Mercifully, it had opened at the deep end of the pool, which severely dampened the resulting detonation. However, almost the entirety of the pool's crystal-clear water turned into a foaming plume, crashing into the bamboo ceiling before cascading back down and rushing towards the walls. With the agility of a trained hunter, Theo leapt backwards and quickly scaled a large bamboo sculpture. With the strength of a starship captain, Eureka leapt up and latched herself tightly onto a strong wall bracket. With the will of someone who faked stomach aches to get out of school sports days, Kez was taken by the oncoming tsunami, dashed against the closest wall to her, and dragged into the pool along with a confused massage robot.

'Kez!' Theo and Eureka cried simultaneously, hopping down onto the wet tiles. Before Theo had a chance to dive in heroically, a half-melted old woman's face emerged above the waves and began to doggy paddle towards the edge of the pool. As she climbed out of the still sloshing water she smiled, causing the face to grin, sideways.

'I better get time off for this,' she said, handing over a dripping chunk of metal to Theo. 'One piece of time trash, as ordered. Mission complete.'

'What is it?' Eureka asked, leaning in to get a better look.

'A fragment of metal,' said Theo, running his hand over a slightly curved chunk the size of a postcard, its surface burned to a crisp. 'Maybe from the hull of the machine?'

'Just a lump of metal?' Eureka asked, inspecting the debris before passing it back, unimpressed. 'Even the mystery is taking time off.'

Kez sneezed, causing her melted old lady face to wobble like horrific jelly.

'You need to turn that off,' Theo said, trying not to make eye contact with it. He had enough problems with nightmares already. 'Now.'

‘I thought we weren’t supposed to do that,’ she said, each syllable causing the pensioner’s lips to flap around like two beached fish held together with an elastic band.

‘We’re supposed to keep a low profile,’ Theo said. ‘This isn’t that.’

‘Fine,’ said Kez, tapping her disguise off. ‘But if Osheen bollocks me for this, I’m going to bring you here again for my birthday party.’

‘You wouldn’t dare,’ Theo gasped.

‘Try me,’ growled Kez. With a scathing stare as a warning shot, Kez threw a towel over her sodden lounger, ready to relax again, despite the pool still consisting of waves you could surf on.

‘No, no,’ said Theo. ‘We’ve got to head back to the penthouse and meet Iscah.’

‘In like forty minutes,’ moaned Kez. ‘I’ll be up then.’

‘Kez.’

‘Fifteen?’ bid Eureka, dragging a lounger over to Kez’s. ‘Twenty at an absolute push.’

Theo laughed and shook his head, giving in to the mutiny. He waved them off and took his leave, hoping to never set eyes on a bamboo divider ever again.

‘Thanks,’ said Kez oddly, as if the words were new in her mouth. ‘I appreciate the backup.’

‘Anytime, Kez,’ winked Eureka. She sighed happily, ticking another mission off in her head. Sure, the pool floor was in disarray, two of the disguises were out of action, and a robot had drowned, but at least she was one step closer to Lily. She lingered on this happy thought just long enough not to notice the bag slipping over her head, muffling her cries for help.

Iscah dropped to the ground, her body weight nullifying the clatter of the vent cover that came down with her. She paused, listening for sounds of life. *Voices*, she thought. *Ahead, two. Behind, clear.*

Back it was. She sprinted down the corridor, spotted a backup vent, leapt a flight of stairs, and paused again.

Ahead, clear.

She continued, lost in this labyrinthine building, her keyring discarded the second she realised what was going on. She needed an access panel, something to buy her time. Something to—

Ahead, two. Shit.

She spun back on herself, heading for the vent she'd tagged earlier. If she was fast enough she'd—

She wasn't fast enough.

Ahead, two. Behind, two.

'Oh, we *need* to tidy this place up,' Theo muttered to himself as he re-entered the pool area ten minutes later.

The twenty or so loungers that had once sat neatly around the pool now looked like they were post-kaiju attack. Every plant looked like it had just run an underwater marathon, and there was still a massage robot sitting at the bottom of the once again perfectly still water.

With a sigh, Theo got to work, straightening sculptures, returning soggy magazines to racks, and tipping slightly chlorinated water out of plant pots. He was just about to start folding towels when a thought occurred to him. This pool room, while exclusive, wasn't *this* exclusive. He wasn't here to tidy. He was here to collect his team.

Where is everyone?

After moving the final lounger back into place, Theo spotted a mark on the floor, right next to where Eureka, Kez, and he had been sitting. He dropped to all fours to investigate, running a fingernail through it, cutting it in two.

Rubber, he thought, confirming it with a sniff. *Shoe soles.*

He rotated himself around the mark, noting that it was only present on the north-facing side of the tile ridges. That's when he spotted another.

Heavy feet, he thought. *Security?*

He stood, eyes narrowed as he ran through options. First, he pulled his keyring off his finger and pelted it into the pool. Second, he heard a scream.

'Unhand me at once!' a woman's voice echoed from nearby. 'Do you know who I am?!'

Theo did. As silently as he could, he slipped through the closest doorway, gently closing the glass door behind him and crouching low beside it to survey without being seen. It was then he remembered that the room he had entered was a seriously hot sauna.

While Theo was chastising himself, two heavily armed and armoured guards came stomping through in perfect synchronisation, each holding an arm of the awful woman crossed behind her back.

Androids? Theo wondered, shrinking back as they passed by, trying to snatch a glimpse of what lay beyond the curved black masks that covered their faces. With a squeak, the guard on the left slipped slightly, releasing his grip on the woman to steady himself on a sculpture made of several rings of interlocking wood. The woman took this opportunity to spin around and deliver a particularly nasty kick into the other guard's plums. He went down, squealing.

Not androids then, Theo thought, leaning back as the woman ran in his direction. He scurried backwards, hiding under one of the raised wooden benches as she came crashing in. She grabbed the sauna ladle, wielding it viciously as one of the guards entered behind her.

'Don't come any closer or I'll—'

Theo never found out how exactly the woman was going to use her ladle in battle, because a single shot from a handgun sent her head snapping backwards, her body following in its arc. Her skull cracked off the open stove in the centre of the room which sizzled, evaporating the flecks of blood that now coated it.

'Our orders were to not kill anyone,' the second guard said as he entered the room.

'Our orders were to keep casualties to a minimum,' the first guard growled, barging his way out of the sauna. 'We've got a collection to make.'

With a grunt, the second guard followed, allowing the door to swing back and forth for a time. Theo counted to thirty before moving, each second longer than the last, his eyes locked onto the wooden slats above his head, for fear of what else he might accidentally glance upon. After counting, he slowly approached the door, leaning as much as he could against the wall. It looked like nobody was in the pool area, but he could only see half of it.

Focus, he thought, taking a hot breath to calm himself. It didn't work. There was a new taste in the air, besides the birch and notes of eucalyptus. A metallic twang. Frying blood.

With a gag, Theo wrenched open the door and re-entered the pool room, taking a second to appreciate how much cooler the air was out here. He didn't have long to rest, as distant squeaking boots indicated the upcoming arrival of more guards. He turned and ran, back towards the elevator, until boots coming the other way stopped him in his tracks again. Quickly, he looked for a new hiding place, but only one was available to him. With a groan of regret, he threw himself into the plunge pool, the icy water immediately taking his breath away and

writing off his disguise. Moments later he surfaced, just as four pairs of boots were walking by.

‘Iscah was right,’ he said, gasping for air as he looked up at the four massive thugs standing over him. ‘That was the worst bit.’

Kez couldn’t quite put a finger on which part of her current predicament was the most distressing. Was it that the luggage hold of the parked spaceship that she found herself trapped in was particularly tiny? Was it that the gag in her mouth tasted like an abandoned pair of underpants that her kidnappers found in a park? Or, was it simply the fact that the thin plastic ties around her wrists made it impossible for her to reach the itch on her eyebrow.

‘Mmmffmf-fmfmfmm,’ she said with an eyeroll.

‘Mmfffm,’ replied Eureka.

Suddenly, a bright light split the darkness in half as the luggage compartment opened again.

‘Got a friend for you,’ the guard growled, as he single-handedly heaved a damp Theo on top of them. With that he slammed the lid shut, plunging the three of them back into darkness.

‘Mffmf,’ said Theo sarcastically.

‘Mffmfmm,’ replied Eureka, trying to push his shoes out of her face with her shoulder.

‘Mmmff!’ yelled Kez as some limb of Theo’s caught her in the small of her back.

‘Mmff,’ apologised Theo.

‘You’d fucking better be,’ said Kez.

It took her a second.

In surprise, she raised her hands up to her face. Her gag was gone. Presumably, so were the plastic ties around her wrists.

‘Hey, I’m free,’ she whispered.

‘Same,’ said Eureka, shifting around to get more space in the small area.

‘AHH!’ yelled Kez suddenly. ‘There’s something on me!’

‘It’s my nanobots, you ploove,’ said Theo, reaching deep into his vocabulary to pull out the required insult.[fn49] ‘Next time, don’t use all of yours to make straws!’

A high-pitched whine was emitted from below Kez, followed by a soft red glow. Then, a small circle opened up by Theo’s head, lighting

the tiny space and giving Theo a view outside, into the same welcome area that they had arrived at. The ship must have teleported in, which made him feel slightly better about having cut a hole through its airtight seal.

'I count four, no, five of these pricks,' he said. 'That's just on this side.'

'I counted eight as we got dragged in here,' said Eureka. 'Those bags they used were naff.'

'Does it matter how many there are?' Kez asked. 'We'll be out of here soon, right? They'll get Iscah, throw her in here with us, and we'll be sent back before they know what's happening.'

Theo sighed.

'They took the beacon,' he said. 'Not to mention the shard of time machine we came here for in the first place.'

'So we're two for two on dreadful missions,' said Eureka, stretching as best as she could in the confined space. 'Go team.'

'I'm three for three,' muttered Kez.

'Damn it,' said Theo as his nanobots scurried back in through the hole. 'The lock is shielded, can't crack it without knowing how.'

'No secondary mechanism?' asked Eureka.

'Nope.'

'Well that's just bad design,' she tutted. 'What if someone gets trapped inside?'

'I believe that's the idea,' said Theo.

'Who are these people?' asked Kez. 'Law enforcement?'

'I watched one of them gun down a defenceless woman,' said Theo darkly, grimacing at the memory. 'I think these are boots for hire. Well trained, ruthless. Somebody wants something valuable from that spa.'

'Us?' asked Kez.

Theo didn't answer. He had suddenly leaned forward, twisting his neck at a horrific angle to see something specific out of his little window.

'Come here, you two, I need you to see this.'

With way more fuss than was necessary, Eureka and Kez spun themselves around, elbows bashing off walls, knees bashing off each other.

'That bloke there,' Theo said, nodding towards one of the closer guards to them. 'Notice anything odd about them?'

'Nope,' said Kez, squeezing Theo out of the way to glance through the hole. 'Same armour, build, weapons …'

‘They’re holding their gun backwards,’ said Eureka through Kez’s hair.

Kez shoved Eureka back out of the way and squinted through the hole. Sure enough, the goon in question was holding their weapon back to front, as well as looking around, almost anxiously.

‘Odd,’ said Kez.

‘Not odd,’ smiled Theo. ‘Iscah.’

A scramble at the hole. Theo wisely backed up as best as he could.

‘I don’t recall Iscah being a couple of feet taller than me,’ Kez said.

‘Her disguise,’ said Eureka. ‘She must have fixed it!’

‘Oh, that’s clever,’ Kez said. ‘Properly clever.’

A wave of movement swept across the guards as the majority of them suddenly turned and jogged back into the spa, leaving the guard with the backwards gun alone.

‘I guess they’ve found what they were looking for,’ said Kez, offering the view to Theo. Theo glanced outside, his retina taking a moment to adjust to the bright light outside, before he saw this last guard walking directly towards them.

‘She’s on her way,’ he reported as relief filled the small hold.

‘Fantastic!’ said Kez.

‘Go Iscah!’ celebrated Eureka.

‘She’s almost here,’ said Theo.

‘So brave,’ said Kez.

‘*So brave*,’ emphasised Eureka.

‘She’s here!’ cheered Theo.

‘Back to the future we go!’ exclaimed Kez.

‘Good old Iscah!’ beamed Eureka.

‘Someone’s hit her with a pipe,’ updated Theo.

Silence in the hold. Outside, muffled yells.

‘Huh?’ Eureka asked, just before something heavy crashed into the ship above them, sliding down its exterior with an awful, drawn-out squeak. Suddenly, the three of them were flooded in two things. The first was brilliant daylight. The second was a smell that nearly took Kez’s eyebrows clean off her face.

‘Wotcha,’ Iscah said, beaming over her crewmates, kicking the unconscious guard out of the way.

‘Jesus fucking *Christ*,’ said Eureka, dragging her uniform’s tight neckline over her nose.

‘The fuck is that?’ said Kez, scrambling for air.

‘What died multiple times?’ asked Theo, gagging horribly for the

second time today.

Iscah frowned, offered the group some choice words, and shut the hold again. She didn't let them out until they'd all apologised.

'When Theo spilled the drink, I noticed that our room had a direct connection to a huge waste system,' Iscah said, standing under one of the reception's waterfalls and rubbing her long dark hair as she spoke. 'So I eventually made it back there and used the sewers to move about, unseen.'

Eureka, Kez, and Theo watched from a distance as the … debris … that had covered Iscah's uniform was washed away by the colossal water pressure.

'From there it was easy,' she said. 'I found the security room, remotely accessed the keyring network, forged some locational data and tracked you lot down.'

She hopped out of the waterfall, climbing over the perfectly lit bushes that surrounded it, and squelched towards them in her sodden shoes. 'They're hired muscle, and they want us and the beacon. Now they have the beacon, we'll have to get it back from the office they've set up shop in,' she said, swiping a towel off a nearby display and going to town with it. 'We've got about five minutes until they come back here, there's only one functional uniform left, and we are outnumbered four or five to one. We should get going.'

Nobody moved.

'Is it still that bad?' Iscah asked.

The group nodded.

'We don't really have the time for me to shower again …'

The group took a collective step back. With a sigh, Iscah looked around, snatched a reed diffuser off the reception desk, and poured 'Fairy Jasmine' oil over herself.

'Better?'

The group shook their heads.

'Why the sewer?' Kez asked, making sure to not breathe through her nose. 'We thought you'd disguise yourself as a guard.'

Iscah laughed and flicked her hair back, sending an ellipsis of water both ways across the reception.

'Well, it turns out that if you give me a choice between potential

dysphoria and climbing through a shit pipe, I'll take the shit pipe every time. Now come on, we've got a beacon to recover and they're about to realise that I'm not hiding under a table in the conference room.'

With that she walked away, leaving a trail of wet footprints for the group to follow, which they did, at a distance.

A table soared across the room, splintering as it landed on the marble floor of the hireable conference room.

'Nothing here, boss,' a grunt grunted as behind him several handfuls of thugs tore the room into shreds. 'She must have escaped.'

The large man growled, reaching into one of the few pockets in his outfit that didn't contain ammunition and pulling out a wafer-thin tablet. With the swipe of a gloved finger, the keyring data was displayed, pinpointing her location as the very empty bit of floor in front of him.

'First you lose her in the corridors, now you lose her in a room with only a single exit,' he growled. 'Find her. Now.'

He scrunched up his face, glowering at the pathetic bit of hardware on which the data was displayed. This is why he liked old CRT monitors. They could take a punch.

'Kermit says they've escaped,' one of the grunts announced, finger to earpiece. 'He was attacked.'

'MORONS,' the large man roared, shattering the tablet in his palm. 'Who decided to put the new man on solo guard duty?'

Fourteen men pointed in fourteen different directions. With a slow, careful breath that his therapist would have been proud of, the large man took a moment to rethink. The mission, a quarry of four. His crew, fifteen men. The pay, doubled if alive. With the mathematics sorted, he wiped out half of the room in a hail of gunfire before dividing the survivors up into search parties. Now, financially, it didn't matter if he killed all four targets.

'This is the place,' Iscah said, stopping her run next to a huge set of wooden double doors, perfectly centred along a short, well-lit corridor.

'Fancy,' said Kez, slightly out of breath, admiring the intricate hand-carved woodwork. 'So, do we blow it up or … ?'

'I think we'll just pick the lock,' said Eureka, seriously out of breath.

‘Any explosion might spread to whatever Iscah is covered in.’

‘She could take us all out,’ nodded Theo cheekily.

‘I should have left you all in that hold,’ muttered Iscah.

Theo placed his hand on the door, fingers splayed. Within seconds, what remained of his nanobots crawled across it, disappearing into the keyhole whereupon a flash of light indicated that something had taken them all out.

‘Damn,’ said Theo, poking at an upturned bot. ‘Electronic pick protection.’

‘So, do we blow it up or … ?’ Kez asked.

‘Watch and learn,’ said Theo, taking a few steps back before charging forward, crashing into the door with all his might. Instantly, he was propelled backwards, his body leaving an imprint in an anti-gravity zen garden that was raking itself up the opposite wall.

‘Forcefield,’ he coughed, standing up and testing his leg.

‘So, do we blow it up or … ?’ Kez asked, happy that her solution was becoming more viable by the second.

‘There’s a window round the back,’ Iscah said, gazing through the keyhole at a room full of old monitors, a lot of weaponry, and two objects that belonged to her crew. ‘It seems to have a latch so a forcefield is unlikely.’

‘We’re sixteen storeys up,’ said Kez. ‘Hell of a climb.’

‘There’s a window here,’ said Eureka from further down the corridor.

The gang wandered over to the window and looked out. Below them, jagged diamond rocks sat, punching twinkling, razor-sharp points into the sky. To the left of them, the edge wall of the office, jutting out perpendicularly from the corridor wall. Four pairs of eyes followed it, and the thin ledge that underlined it, until it vanished out of sight in another sharp right angle. Silently, Theo grabbed a nearby vase and lobbed it out of the window. It sailed for half a second, before suddenly accelerating into the ground at an extraordinarily high speed. It didn’t just shatter when it hit the diamonds below. It dissolved.

‘Not it,’ said Kez, shrinking back. ‘Why don’t we just wait by the door and hope we’re close enough to the beacon?’

‘The forcefield might diminish the beacon’s range,’ said Eureka, listing off reasons on her fingers. ‘We’d fail the mission and, most importantly, we might not be close enough.’

Kez pouted and took another look out the window. ‘I think it’s the best idea we’ve got,’ she said.

‘Well, at least if I fall, I won’t be falling for long,’ said Theo, hopping

up onto the ledge. Eureka grabbed his arm.

'And what makes you think you're going?' she asked.

'Osheen made me the twat-in-charge,' he shrugged as he stepped down onto the thin ledge. 'A role I take very serious—'

With a crack, the ledge under him crumbled away. Eureka tightened her grip as Theo grabbed the windowsill with his other hand. Together, they heaved him back into the corridor.

'Kez is right,' Theo said, waving off the usual visions of his life that were flashing in front of him. 'We'll wait it out.'

'I'll have a crack at it,' Iscah said, kicking her damp boots off and drying her feet on the carpet for grip. 'I'm clearly the smallest and lightest here.'

'I can't ask you to do that,' said Theo.

'Well, it's a good thing I wasn't waiting for you to,' she smiled, slipping out of the window and onto the ledge, taking care to not step near the section that Theo had put his foot through. She glanced down at the certain death below, and decided that she wouldn't be doing that again in a hurry.

'Be careful!' said Kez suddenly, causing Iscah to wobble slightly, gripping the edge of the windowsill for stability. She turned and glared.

'None of you, under any circumstances, are allowed to say anything to me until this is over,' she hissed. 'Understood?'

Rapid, apologetic nods came through the window. Theo pointed and mouthed 'We'll wait by the door', before the three of them disappeared out of the frame.

Iscah shifted around the side of the window, still clinging tightly to the edge of it, her back flat against the wall, weight on her heels, head up straight. She became instantly aware that if she shifted her centre of mass too far forward, she'd have no way of stopping the fall.

After a moment of shuffling, she'd made it to the corner where the wall came out from the corridor, her hand still firmly locked onto the window frame.

Facing towards or away, she wondered, plotting her steps along the ledge. *Back to the wall will give me a better centre of gravity, but the corner will be far trickier. Front on would give me flexibility on my toes, plus better intel of any upcoming hazards and handholds.*

Iscah glanced down the wall, a slightly bumpy stucco. Handholds were going to be few and far between, if any.

Towards, Iscah decided, kicking off the exterior corridor wall and

pivoting around the toes of her left foot. She came to a stop against the outside wall of the office, hands out to the side, lightly pressing on the bumps in the concrete like they were trying to whisper braille.

OK, she breathed to herself. *Five, maybe six metres to the corner. I can do this.*

With her head tilted to the side, face against the rough wall, she slowly slid a foot in the direction of her goal, planted it, shifted her weight, and moved the back one to join.

One step down.

She did it again, ignoring the sharp pain as the wall scratched against her face, her hands longing to grip something, anything.

Two down.

She pressed on, taking each step on her toes, heels floating above the abyss.

Three. Four. Five.

Her foot landed on a sharp piece of concrete that cut into the skin. She pressed it down, keeping the stability through the pain.

Where are you?

Another handful of movements came and went. She could now feel blood dripping from the deepening scratch on her cheek.

Why can't I feel you anymore?

Her calves started to burn, lactic acid doing its darndest to make this more difficult.

Why have you left me?

Iscah reached the corner, her right hand instinctively gripping the edge. She rounded it carefully, taking a second to appreciate the lack of wind on the planet, her steps quartering in size as her right foot transferred onto the new wall. As her head passed the corner, the landscape beyond caught her eye. Miles and miles of transparent rocks, sitting behind the resort. From here, the sun didn't catch them properly, making them appear dull and lifeless, like all the joy had left the world.

A crack. The pressure of moving her back foot forward had taken a chunk of the ledge away. She breathed slowly, keeping her heart rate as calm as she could.

With one last small step, Iscah's fingers left the gritty wall and squeaked across glass. Quickly, they played across the join between the two, looking for anything to grip onto. They found nothing.

Iscah began to panic. Not only was the window flush with the wall, but from this side it was clear that the latch was decorative. This

window didn't open.

Of course. High up. No wind. No breeze. No need for a window that opens. I should have spotted that. I should have noticed.

A fearful tear rolled down her face, stinging as it ran through the crevices of the cuts on her cheek. She couldn't go back, she couldn't go forward. She was stuck.

'Why are you doing this to me?' she said, fear crashing through her body unrestricted, the muscles in her legs screaming with pain as her heart accelerated. 'What did I do to you?'

She closed her eyes, anxiously reaching out for the energy that ribboned through the universe. The energy that gave her strength. Gave her life. Gave her hope.

It wasn't there.

The ledge under Iscah split, dropping slightly and causing her to slap her hand on the window as she corrected her balance. She looked down, watching a crack slowly spread across the only thing stopping her from falling to her death.

What was that?

Iscah received the information before she knew where it was coming from. The glass was a single pane, no more than a millimetre thick, if that. Breakable, even if it was ultrathin silicone.

There!

Iscah gently slapped the glass again, counteracting the impact by pulling her heels up higher. She felt the reverberations buzz across her palm, feeding her information about its construction. Instinct. Carefully, she manoeuvred herself until her right shoulder was parallel with the edge of the pane. When in position, she placed her palm against the glass one last time, her golden sphere clinking as it contacted the glass before her skin did.

Then she closed her eyes. She imagined the window, sitting in a room she'd only ever seen once. A metre or so tall, inset in the concrete, leaving a small windowsill with paperwork stacked on it. The paperwork, pressed against the window, hung over the edge of the windowsill by about an inch. That meant that the wall itself was about seven inches thick. Iscah opened her eyes. If she could break through the glass, grab the other side of the wall, then she'd be able to pull herself in. Lacerations were likely, but she was sure the uniform would bear a lot of that brunt. The downside was that if her initial strike didn't break the window, then the rebounding momentum of her palm would take her off the ledge. The upside? She wouldn't be falling long.

Carefully, she bit the sleeve of her uniform, dragging it up her wrist as far as possible to reduce the chance of slicing any of the really important blood vessels. Then, she drew her palm back as far as she was comfortable with, plus a centimetre more.

I don't need you.

The glass shattered as her palm hit it, engulfing her hand in the cool, conditioned air beyond. She kept the momentum going, shards slicing her fingers, as she curved her elbow around the wall, grasping for anything solid. Her left shoulder pulled away, taking her centre of gravity beyond the ledge, just as her fingers collided with the side of the wall she was trying to reach beyond. She'd miscalculated.

The wall under her fingertips began to fall away, her arm retreating from the hole it had just made, glass shards cutting her to ribbons as she began to fall.

Iscah always imagined that at the moment of her death, a great peace would envelop her, washing her presence away from this place to the next. But here, now, falling towards this dead planet, she felt nothing. She realised that this was for one of two possible reasons. Either she wasn't going to die, or she had truly been abandoned. As her hand began to fall past the pane, she knew in her heart which was the more likely.

'Gottcha!' yelled Theo, clasping his hand around Iscah's wrist and heaving her through the window into the office beyond. Blood, glass, and a supremely thankful woman fell into the room, collapsing onto Theo as they landed.

'Fucking hell!' exclaimed Kez.

'Good catch, my man!' shouted Eureka.

Iscah stood, her heart erratic, mouth open, shock and adrenaline making up most of her bodily fluids. Her hand was bleeding heavily, twitching slightly as each drip rolled off her fingers and onto the carpet underfoot. She collected her thoughts, formed a realisation, and started to thank the group.

'YOU BASTARDS,' she yelled, almost foaming at the mouth in rage. 'HOW DID YOU GET IN THIS *FUCKING* ROOM BEFORE ME?!'

'We cut the power to the shields,' coughed Eureka, pointing out of the open double doors at a sparking wall panel. Iscah's eyes darted between them, pupils wide, eyebrows angry. Very angry.

'Why didn't you fucking say something?!' Iscah exclaimed, her hand waves flicking blood across multiple surfaces. 'I nearly fucking died out there!'

‘You told us not to,’ said Theo sheepishly, ripping a curtain down to use as makeshift bandages.

‘We didn’t want to scare you,’ said Kez.

‘You might have fallen,’ agreed Eureka.

A red haze descended over Iscah. The high-pitched whine in her ears began to drown out the thumping of her heart. She was going to break something in the next few seconds, it was just a question of what.

‘ON THE GROUND, NOW!’ screamed the two guards as they strode into the room, weapons drawn, fingers on triggers. ‘I SAID NOW!’

Perfect, thought Iscah.

With a swing of a cupped hand, the closest vase to her went sailing into the left thug’s face, causing both it and his nose to shatter on impact. Before he hit the ground, Iscah was on the desk, a bloody foot kicking her off at a high velocity into the thug on the right, tackling him to the ground, neck first.

‘Impressive,’ said the large man aiming a loaded gun at Iscah’s head as he walked into the room. ‘But do you think you could really—’

With a sweep of his leg, the large man went down, firing pointlessly into the ceiling until the butt of his own weapon descended square onto his jaw. A final series of moves sent the three guns sliding across the floor, far away from their owners.

For a moment, everything was still. The three men lay on the ground, groaning, as if anyone in the room might care, as a light dust floated down from the bullet holes in the ceiling, swirling around Iscah, and allowing one person in the room to declare victory.

‘I FUCKING KNEW IT!’ yelled Kez, before flinching as Iscah spun around and pointed at her.

‘It wasn’t a secret monastery,’ barked Iscah, stepping towards Kez, driving the point of her finger into her chest. ‘It wasn’t in the mountains, and it’s pure coincidence that I happened to achieve a high level of multi-species self-defence before travelling the cosmos.’

‘Did you learn it from monks?’ Kez asked quietly before ducking out of the way of Iscah’s second hurled vase of the day.

‘Speaking as your twat-in-charge, this would have been a pretty useful skillset to know about,’ said Theo as he wrapped a shredded curtain around Iscah’s hand.

‘I’ve not raised a finger in aggression since I was ordained,’ Iscah said, wincing as Theo tightened the bandage. ‘I took a vow of pacifism.’

‘That was pacifism?’ Theo asked, completing the knot that Morag

had taught him.

'I didn't break the vow first,' Iscah said, squeezing her bandaged hand tight.

'Two minutes,' Eureka said, handing the beacon and the time machine fragment over to Theo. 'Mind if I do a little questioning?'

'Be my guest,' smiled Theo.

'Who sent you?' Eureka asked, kneeling over the large man. 'Who set us up?'

The man didn't speak, probably because his jaw was seriously dislocated. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a neatly folded square of paper, which he handed over. He then pretended to faint, which only fooled the thug to his left, and Eureka was pretty sure that guy had a severe concussion.

'One minute,' said Theo as he glanced around the room. The broken window. The shredded curtains. The bullet holes in the ceiling. 'Excellent stealth mission, everyone.'

'Boots!' said Iscah suddenly. 'Where are my boots?'

The trio shared a shrug between themselves.

'Seriously? After all, I just … ? Unbelievable.'

Iscah left the room, taking care to step on neither glass nor goon. In the corridor, she spotted her boots exactly where she'd left them, by the open window. She bent down to pick them up, and in doing so she dodged a bullet meant for her head.

'We've got company!' she yelled, diving back into the room amid a hail of gunfire and slamming the doors shut behind her, barring them with a nearby chair.

'Thirty seconds,' said Theo, clasping the metal and the beacon tightly as everyone took cover behind the CRTs.

'I've got this!' yelled Kez, picking up the large man's gun. 'Stand back!'

She took aim, as she had done so many times in superior reality, and fired a perfect shot at the locking controls next to the door. The wall panel exploded as the bullet tore through it, sending sparks and scraps of metal into the room like an unsafe party popper.

'Ha!' Kez yelled in excitement, really hoping that looked as cool as it felt.

With a click, the doors began to slowly swing open.

'The fuck did you do that for?' Iscah said in a panic.

'I …' began Kez. 'I thought that would lock the door.'

'Damaging the controls would lock the door!?' said Iscah. 'Then how

do you get out in an emergency? Think of the lawsuits, Kez!'

Kez looked on, utterly bewildered, as her love of entertainment failed her and five armed guards crashed into the room, ready to fire. Theo checked the beacon. In seven seconds they would be home. Sadly, in about four they'd be dead. All he needed was a small handful of extra seconds and everyone would live. He needed a way out. Any way out.

That's why, and she wouldn't see it this way no matter how hard he explained it afterwards, he grabbed Kez and threw her out of the window.

Chapter Eighteen

Goodbye and Goodnight

LUCAS | 2783

Osheen Shupple stared at his time travellers as they told their story, each one backing up their tale with splattered evidence, both blood and faecal.

'I can't believe you risked jumping out of the window,' he said, a huge grin on his face as they regaled him.

'I didn't really have a choice,' said Kez. 'These two bodied me and Eureka out of there before we knew what was going on.'

'I hate that damn window,' Iscah muttered, as Morag and her nanobots stitched various parts of her skin back together. 'Easily my least favourite.'

'Don't badmouth it,' Theo said, pointing a bloodied appendage. 'It saved our lives there.'

'Anyone mind if I make the joke about it sounding like a real *pane*?' Bea grinned, amidst boos.

'Anyway, the beacon activated as we were falling, saving us from hitting the planet,' concluded Theo. 'It's a damn good thing the time machine doesn't conserve momentum.'

'By design,' said Osheen. 'Like matter couriers, if we kept your speed when travelling from a planet, you'd appear at your destination and then fly into the nearest wall at tens of thousands of miles per hour.'

'On that note,' said Iscah, indicating the small pool of blood that surrounded her, 'we did leave quite a bit of evidence behind. Is that going to be a problem?'

'Well, the timeline is still here,' shrugged Osheen. 'I guess not.'

'Very scientific,' muttered Kez as Osheen turned his attention to the pile of items on the table beside him. Three damaged, yet repairable disguises, the beacon, the piece of metal from Austin's time machine, and the note Eureka recovered. He picked up the latter.

'How did they know we were coming?' Theo asked as Osheen unfolded the paper to reveal a sketch of the beacon, as well as brief instructions to apprehend the four people who were carrying it. It wasn't signed.

‘I have theories,’ he said, placing the paper down and picking up the burned chunk of metal, locked away inside another of Malcolm’s protective transparent cubes. Osheen held the metal up to the light, furrowing his brow so hard he nearly scalped himself.

‘You feel like sharing any of them?’ Theo asked.

Osheen didn’t reply. He was too busy manipulating the metal, trying to catch the light just so. ‘I think there’s writing under this burn,’ he said softly. ‘Clive, take this down to Malcolm, see if he can clean it up.’

‘Why is it you only notice me when you want something?’ Clive huffed, snatching the metal and storming out of the medical room.

‘Osheen,’ Theo said, trying to snap his attention back to the point at hand. ‘Do you think Austin is tracking us?’

‘Hmm?’ Osheen said, his mouth moving before his brain had processed the question. ‘No, I don’t think so. I know this past trip looks bad, but it might just be the consequences of a mission from far, far in the future. Remember, they didn’t know your faces. I don’t think it’ll be a problem on Venus.’

He laughed the world’s smallest laugh, before realising that Theo’s posture had suddenly collapsed.

‘Venus?’ asked Theo.

‘Venus,’ repeated Osheen. ‘Your next destination.’

‘This is a joke, right?’ Theo asked, one hand pointing accusatorily, the other gripping a bed guard rail for support.

‘No joke,’ said Osheen. ‘Venus; 2543.’

‘Fifth of June?’ asked Theo.

‘How did you—’

Theo kicked the closest bedside table over before pacing the room, hands over his mouth.

‘What happened in 2543?’ Eureka asked Kez, before a glazed look in reply made her lean over and repeat the question to Iscah.

‘The fifth of June 2543,’ nodded Iscah solemnly. ‘The day Venus was destroyed.’

‘Venus was destroyed?’ Eureka exclaimed, bringing up information about it in her EC. Sure enough, there sat Venus, still whole, but cracked right down the middle like a shocked Pac-Man. A once fiery core now dark and frozen, exposed to the endless cold of space.

‘You said there were three destinations,’ Theo said, his hands shaking. ‘Aradisi, Venus, where?’

‘The Moon,’ said Osheen. ‘You’ll be going to the Moon.’

‘Early-to-mid 2100s?’

Osheen sat forward, a smile creeping up one side of his face, as if he was daring Theo to be smarter than him.

'What have you seen that I haven't?' he asked. 'What happened on the Moon in 2154?'

'Hey, I was at university on the Moon then,' said Eureka, suddenly cottoning on. 'That can't be a coincidence, can it?'

Theo sat back onto a bed, hands on his lap, focusing himself.

'Our first mission, pre-historic Earth, Iscah came away from it with her faith in pieces. Then, Kez's dream destination ended with kidnapping. After Venus, we're going to visit the very place that the Eureka Shine this galaxy knows was born.'

'Coincidence!' Osheen said, waving the ideas away before they spread. 'Besides, that logic doesn't hold up. Venus was destroyed two hundred and forty years ago. That's a bit before your time, young man.'

Theo sighed a heavy, ancient sigh. He looked over to Morag, whose soft smile and nod prompted him to talk about it.

'No,' he said. 'That's not before my time. I was there, on the very last Venusian day.'

'Impossible,' said Osheen with a sharp laugh. 'That would make you —'

'Two hundred and forty-seven,' said Theo.

'Well, I never would have guessed that,' muttered Eureka, remembering their conversation on Earth.

'But how?' asked Osheen, giving Theo a look like he wanted to cut him in half to count his rings.

'Theo here is a biological wunderkind,' said Morag. 'With modern medicine, most people get one, maybe two replacement organs or lab-grown limbs before their body rejects any more. Theo, for a reason that is medically beyond me, doesn't have that limit.'

'Something fails or breaks, I just swap it out,' shrugged Theo. 'Have done my whole life.'

'Fascinating,' said Osheen. 'Truly remarkable.'

'Remarkable and irreplicable,' said Morag. 'Not from a lack of trying. Do you know how hard it is to sequence someone's DNA without waking them?'

'Wait, what?' said Theo.

'"No original parts",' said Kez. 'That's what you said on our first day here.'

'I wasn't lying,' smiled Theo. 'If we head to Venus, a seven-year-old

Theo will be there.'

'Also, from what I hear, an apocalypse,' said Eureka. 'I'm not sure which is more dangerous.'

Osheen frowned.

'Then you won't go,' he said. 'Not yet anyway. We'll find out exactly what's going on before you travel again. Let's get some rest, regroup tomorrow, and work out how to spring this trap without being caught in it.'

The group mumbled in agreement and filed out of the room, groaning slightly as aching parts were put into action. Before Theo left, a mechanical hand grabbed his, interrupting his journey towards whatever delights Alphonse had prepared for them.

'Hey, old man,' said Morag. 'Proud of you.'

A familiar pain shot through Theo's heart as he returned a warm smile, nodded, and once again lied to himself that he'd made the right decision about her.

'I'm sorry, the connection must have broken up. Did you say, *out of the window*?'

Osheen's laugh echoed around his office as he enjoyed the look of surprise on Fatoumata's projected face.

'Right out of it!' Osheen said, simulating the defenestration with his hands. 'What brilliant, mad fools.'

'So, the temporal relic made it back successfully?'

'Collected and documented,' Osheen said, offering Fatoumata the entire technical log that Malcolm had produced earlier that day. 'You can come and visit it if you'd like.'

Fatoumata nodded in that very specific way that means 'no'.

'About that,' they said. 'This will be my last daily check-in for about a week. Something has come up.'

'Something more important than tracking down our mysterious time traveller?' Osheen chuckled, his levity not returned by the other participant of the conversation.

'We've got a lead on the Betelgeuse supernova,' Fatoumata said. 'It might not be a one-off. Baxter and I are having to go dark.'

Osheen stood, leaning forwards on his desk. There weren't many reasons for the highest-ranking human to vanish from the public eye, and all of them were bad.

‘What have you found?’ he asked gravely. Fatoumata didn’t reply, their eyes flicking to the only other person in the room with Osheen. Bea took a moment to understand the hint before deactivating her auditory processing unit.

‘The Plofbare solar experiments were tampered with by a non-Affinity party,’ Fatoumata said solemnly. ‘If that’s true, then we will have to consider this an act of war.’

‘Oh,’ swallowed Osheen. ‘That’s …’

‘… why we have to be sure,’ said Fatoumata.

‘I was going to say, “not good”,’ mumbled Osheen. Fatoumata’s eyes snapped onto something out of frame. They nodded, indicating to Osheen that their time was up.

‘Take care,’ Osheen said warmly. ‘Give Baxter a pat for me.’

‘You too,’ Fatoumata replied, attempting a half smile and getting a quarter of the way there. ‘My regards to that delightful crew of yours. You’ve always been sharper with people behind you.’

‘I couldn’t have requisitioned a better team,’ Osheen chuckled, returning Fatoumata’s wave as they terminated the call.

As silence returned to his office, he sat back into his chair, processing the conversation. He briefly wondered if war was an inevitability for the Affinity. The universe was a big place, and eventually they’d meet someone who disagreed with …

‘AUGHHHH!’

Osheen jumped up, startled by the four people who were falling over themselves laughing at his expense. ‘How long have you lot been there?’ he exclaimed, wondering if he’d accidentally just leaked state secrets two seconds after learning them.

‘*I couldn’t have requisitioned a better team*,’ Theo imitated over the giggling group. ‘I’ve walked in on worse reviews of myself.’

‘Oh, I bet you have,’ Kez chuckled.

‘We’re about to play a few hands,’ Iscah said, brandishing a pack of playing cards at Osheen. ‘Wondered if you two wanted to join us.’

‘Me?’ said Osheen, genuinely taken aback. ‘You want me to play with you?’

‘Oh fuck off with the grinch-invited-to-Christmas act,’ Eureka chuckled. ‘We just want to fleece you for whatever isn’t nailed down. Come on.’

With that, the quartet headed to the cafeteria, Osheen and Bea in tow, as a long, long way away, his closest friend marched to war.

‘Alright, Clive,’ Theo said, ready to jot down the response on his lined notepad. ‘Three rounds to play, how many do you think you’ll win?’

Clive looked down at his terrible, terrible hand of cards. Luckily for him, he could still win points with a correct guess. ‘None,’ he shrugged.

‘You can’t bet none,’ Osheen replied speedily, dashing the threadbare hope that Clive had been clinging to. ‘If you did, the number of bets to win would match the number of rounds. Someone always has to lose.’

Theo nodded in confirmation, pointing his pencil at each person in turn. ‘Kez bet one, Eureka none, Malcolm none, Alphonse none, Iscah none, Osheen bafflingly bet two, me none, Morag none, Bea none.’

‘So, I have to say that I’m going to win one round?’ Clive said, glancing down at his useless cards again, hoping that several aces had spontaneously appeared, ‘despite the fact that I definitely won’t?’

‘You could always bet two or three wins,’ Kez smirked over the top of her cards.

‘One then,’ sighed Clive. ‘But put a little asterisk by my bet.’

‘Why?’ Theo asked.

‘To show that I’m protesting it.’

Theo laughed and drew a small asterisk by Clive’s bet.

‘Three rounds to play,’ he announced to the table. ‘Osheen needs to win two of them, Kez wants one, and Clive also needs to win one, despite not wanting to. Kez to play.’

Kez withdrew one of the three cards from her hand, grinned evilly, and played the ace of clubs. ‘Oh come on!’ Osheen cried as the rest of the table groaned, throwing out their lowest value card of the same suit. ‘This round was mine to win!’

‘Then win it,’ Kez said, poking out her tongue.

Osheen grumbled and slapped down a king of clubs, causing the table to erupt into such a noise that Bea worried that the neighbours might complain.

‘Unbelievable,’ Osheen sighed, desperately trying to recalculate a victory from his two remaining cards.

‘This is a great game, Kez,’ Iscah laughed. ‘What was it called again?’

‘Nomination whist,’ Kez said, taking a deep swig of something orange and fizzy. ‘We used to play all the time on the station.’

‘I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to ask, but where’s home, Kezia?’ Osheen asked, indicating the galaxy out of the cafeteria window. Kez tilted her head at the Milky Way, trying to remember the

maps she'd learned in tertiary education. Eventually, working it out from Earth's rough position, she pointed.

'Just there,' she said, closing one eye to get the point as close as possible. 'A little station around a medium-sized star.'

Osheen leaned in to follow the point, which led him to an area that contained at least several million little white dots.

'Which star?' he asked, looking to narrow it down a tad.

'Star 2MASS J1941-4602,' said Kez. 'The closest star to Earth without a name, these days.'[fn50]

'It's a great name,' said Osheen. 'Historical. I like it.'

'I think I prefer *Lucas*,' said Eureka.

'I'd forgotten about that,' laughed Osheen. 'I'll have to get a commemorative plaque made.'

'Better than my station's name,' said Kez.

'Which is … ?'

'Star 2MASS J1941-4602: Station Alpha.'

'You know,' said Osheen, looking wistfully around his cafeteria. 'On reflection, *Lucas* isn't that bad.'

Once the chuckles had died down, everyone sat in silence for a moment, watching as Iscah dealt the next round of cards.

'Do you regret it, Osheen?' Theo asked, the question escaping before his brain had time to filter it.

'Yes,' Bea chirped. 'Whatever you're going to say, he probably regrets it.'

'Not being able to use the time machine?' asked Theo.

Osheen's eyebrows revealed his slight surprise at that question. 'You know, years ago, I would have said it was breaking my heart,' he said softly. 'I imagined myself travelling through history, watching the world grow and learn, visiting those I've lost …'

He trailed off for a moment, looking out towards the stars. If he looked long enough, he'd see them again.

'Then I thought to myself, is that fair? The temporal observer effect meant that the world would change just by me being there. Imagine a friend of yours appears, but they're from way off in the future. The transfer of information would be enormous. Suddenly, you know a huge piece of your future, and now you've got to keep this secret until the day you die. That'll change their life forever, just so I can say goodbye? I decided, eventually, that it just wasn't fair.'

Osheen pretended to rearrange his glasses, using the movement to discreetly wipe a tear from his eye. The internal battle that waged over

this decision was long gone, but the wounds remained. ‘And what about history?’ he continued. ‘Do we even have the right to observe what really happened, to obliterate the work that historians and scholars have spent entire lifetimes working on? Does history have a right to privacy?’

Osheen sighed.

‘Sorry,’ he chuckled, flashing an exhausted smile at the table. ‘Mid card game is probably not the time for discussions like this.’

‘You’re saying that history is an art, not a science,’ nodded Iscah. ‘It’s as much about the people who wrote it as what they wrote about?’

‘Yes, exactly!’ said Osheen, eyes lighting up before fading quickly. ‘That doesn’t matter though does it. My hand has very much been forced.’

‘Austin Lang,’ grumbled Alphonse.

‘Yeah,’ sighed Osheen. ‘Austin fucking Lang.’

Suddenly, Malcolm beeped, as if he was his own alarm.

‘Cleaning complete,’ he announced. ‘Would you like me to prepare a report?’

‘Bugger the report!’ Osheen exclaimed, slapping his cards back onto the table. ‘Bring it here, now!’

Malcolm wiggled, causing the now shiny fragment of Austin’s time machine to appear in the centre of the table. Osheen snatched it up as Malcolm explained his process.

‘While no traces of ink could be found, unsurprising due to the damage, the metal underneath the ink was protected for a fraction of a second longer than the rest. Therefore, when …’

Malcolm trailed off, aware that the room wasn’t listening. Instead, they were looking at Osheen, who was suddenly looking much, much whiter than usual.

‘What is it, Osheen?’ Theo asked, as the entire table leaned in. Osheen placed the metal fragment back onto the table carefully, aware of the damage this was about to do.

‘It says … “For Harker”,’ he breathed.

Slowly, the table turned to Kez.

‘Mum?’ she said, a sudden sharp pain tearing away at the inside of her throat. ‘What’s her name doing …’

Kez stood, flinging her chair out of the way before leaving the room, tears dotting the floor as she went. Theo stood to follow, but Osheen pulled him back.

‘Give her space, lad,’ he said, before turning his attention to his

flying friend. ‘Bea, route all our communication lines through wherever she ends up. I assume she’ll want to talk to her father, let’s make that call possible.’

Bea nodded and got to work.

‘If you don’t mind, I’ll start dinner,’ Alphonse said, clearly uncomfortable. ‘Thanks for the game, all.’

Alphonse wandered off, glancing at the piece of metal one last time as he went.

‘For Harker,’ Theo said softly. ‘That can’t be a coincidence.’

‘I think we’re out of coincidences now,’ Eureka nodded.

‘Agreed,’ said Iscah. ‘What we need to know now is if—’

Suddenly, a muffled commotion blasted out from the kitchen. Pots clanged, cutlery hit the floor, a bottle popped against a hard surface, and something seriously heavy crashed against the kitchen shutters.

‘Alphonse?’ Osheen said, hopping up to his feet. ‘Are you alright?’

Silence. The room stood as Osheen held them back with a wave of his hand, slowly approaching the kitchen by himself.

‘Is everything OK in there?’ he asked.

With a cacophony of metal, the shutters raised, revealing a grinning, panting man, his face bloodied and white shirt ripped slightly from an apparent fight. ‘Your help has had a bit of an accident,’ he said, wiping blood away from the corner of his mouth onto his collar. ‘He’s fine, probably. I don’t really care.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Osheen, nanobots crawling down his arm, forming a thin blade in his hand. ‘Who are you?’

The man smiled, clambering onto the counter, his feet scuffing the transparent front as he perched on top of it.

‘*They* know,’ he said, pointing behind Osheen.

Osheen turned. The crew of *Lucas* were looking baffled. The time travellers were looking terrified. Slowly, with a calm breath, Osheen turned back.

‘Austin,’ he said.

The man smiled a devilish grin.

Many, many lightyears away, a classic 2580s hit rang in Fred’s brain, ripping him from a dream where he’d just been crowned ‘Best Ice Skater of the Year’ by his old geography teacher. ‘’lo?’ he muttered, eyelids unflinching. ‘I’m off message now, but if you could leave a duty

…’

He trailed off. They got the idea.

‘Hi, Dad.’

‘Kez!?’ he exclaimed, eyes exploding open as his short, fat, hairy legs scrambled against a duvet to get him upright. ‘I’ve been trying to reach you but it kept saying you were out of range and I—’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said softly, sounding close to tears.

‘You alright, my love?’ he asked, activating his camera and giving her a big, sleepy smile. Kez’s camera didn’t activate to return it.

‘Not really,’ she croaked. ‘I’m having a bit of a tough time.’

Fred’s heartstrings pulled so hard he worried that Kez might have heard the sound they made.

‘You wanna talk about it, love?’ he asked.

For a moment, there was silence on the other line, broken up by crackles of missing audio packets. She must be damn far away to have call quality this bad.

‘It’s about Mum,’ Kez sniffed after a time.

A lump immediately formed in Fred’s throat, cutting off his initial reply. A burning heap of feelings spread around his body, threatening to rip space and time apart so he could hug his child.

‘It’s alright, Kez,’ he said. ‘Whatever it is, it’ll be alright.’

Kez’s line went silent again, breaths crackling across god knows how far. ‘I might be about to find out why she left,’ Kez said. ‘What happened to her.’

‘We know what happened to her, sweetie,’ Fred said. ‘She was lost while being brave and brilliant.’

Kez took a few stuttery breaths.

‘I’m not sure about that anymore,’ she said. ‘I’m worried it’s something … bad.’

‘Do you want to come home?’ her dad offered, trying to not overanalyse Kez’s last word. ‘If it’s too much for you, there’s a bunk in the other room that literally has your name on it.’

Kez nodded, far too far away to be seen.

‘No,’ she said, wiping tears away. ‘I need to see this through. I’m just being silly.’

Fred smiled. Oh sure, his heart was burning and he’d not sleep again tonight, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that Kez had turned out pretty damn OK.

‘You remind me of her so much,’ he whispered back. ‘The downside of you taking after your mum is that you have her spirit. You’ll do

wondrous, brilliant things.'

'Is that a downside?' Kez asked.

'No,' he chuckled. 'The grey hairs these wondrous, brilliant things will give me are the downside.'

With that, he began to point to his most recently acquired strands. They suited him. 'I'm not going to lie,' he continued. 'You being out there in the universe scares the hell out of me every day. But that's my fear, not yours. I can get over it, because I don't have the right, nor the desire, to hold you back from becoming whoever it is you're going to be.'

Fred glanced up at the wall across from his bed. Propped on top of an exposed water pipe sat a picture of him hugging his favourite thing in the universe. He gave her a smile.

'I don't want to worry you,' Kez said.

'You will,' Fred chuckled. 'It's a dad thing.'

Kez laughed. Not a huge laugh, just a small exhale of air through a snotty nostril. Enough to get her back on track.

'Feeling any better?' he asked, the grin replastered over his face.

'A little,' Kez nodded, wishing that he could see her too, but not wanting him to have to sit with the image of her crying. 'How's Mrs Pickering doing?'

'Um …' he replied, wondering if now was the right time for this conversation. After batting it about in his mind for a bit, he decided it was. 'Bit of sad news I'm afraid. She passed yesterday.'

'Oh no,' Kez said softly. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there.'

'It's fine, my love,' Fred said, promising himself that the next conversation he had with Kez wouldn't be so heart-breaking. 'She had so many friends and family over, you probably wouldn't have been able to fit in her quarters anyway.'

'I'll miss her,' Kez said, memories randomly popping up inside her brain. Those red and white swirled sweets she made. Decorating the central column with her for the holidays. The karaoke incidents.

'Funeral will be Thursday next,' Fred said, suddenly remembering about forty things he needed to organise before then. 'Do you think you'll be able to—'

Before Fred could finish his sentence, something distorted the conversation even further. He only heard a few more seconds before it cut out entirely, but three sounds stood out in that time. A couple of low thuds, the shattering of glass that aligned with a third, and the brief scream of his daughter.

‘KEZIA?’ he yelled into the silence, waking up everybody aboard his station. ‘KEZIA?!’

She replied, but he couldn’t hear her. You see, sound doesn’t travel in a vacuum.

Throughout history, the most recent invention to enter the public eye has tended to be demonised by folks as warping the minds of young people. Superior Reality, Virtual Suits, VR, video games, movies, rap music, pop music, classical music, all the way back to cave paintings that probably set some mothers off. The worry is that children will imitate the media that they consume, so a child playing a violent video game will end up being violent, and a child watching a violent stage production will end up being violent in a classier way.

Kez, as she struggled for oxygen that wasn’t anywhere near her, briefly wished that some of her Superior Reality skills had transferred. If this was a game, she’d be able to grab something useful nearby, use it to propel herself back into the space station that was rapidly moving away from her, and if any of that went tits up, she could simply reload from a checkpoint, or cheat. Here though, as a black hole pulled her infinitely down, and the spacesuits with attached thrusters stored by each and every airlock fell further and further away, there was no undo button.

Hang on, said E-NA, taking control. *You’ll be OK.*

Kez felt her nanobots scuttle along her cheek, diving down her throat, into her lungs and bloodstream. They started producing and directly distributing oxygen as best they could. There wasn’t a lot to work with, repetitive and severe Affinity training had made Kez breathe out the moment she was flung into space on instinct, preventing her lungs from rupturing as she decompressed. Concurrently, a small team of nanobots made sure to stop the liquids in her body from vaporising in the vacuum. With these actions, Kez’s survival time went up from fifteen seconds to about forty-five.

It’s going to be OK, E-NA said as she tried the teleporters again, and again was rebuffed. Something was preventing her from accessing them.

It’s going to be OK.

The impact threw the crew of *Lucas* to the floor, with the exception of Osheen who had crashed enough shuttles in his time to instinctively brace for any sort of turbulence.

'What have you done?' Osheen barked, as Bea filled his vision with damage reports. A large object had collided with one of the support pylons, obliterating a section of the walkway that connected the time machine and living quarters. Thankfully, it looked like the main structure of the support was holding for now.

'A warning shot,' Austin giggled, kicking his feet as he spoke. 'To let you know I mean business. I have demands, and if you don't fulfil them, this station, and all you clowns, will be obliterated.'

That was enough for Osheen. With a deft motion he launched his nanobot blade at Austin. It hit its mark, spurting claret on impact with his chest.

'Nailed him!' Iscah cheered.

'Oh please,' scoffed Austin, wincing as he pulled the blade from his chest, strings of viscera following it out. 'He didn't even hit an organ.'

He leaned back into the kitchen, grabbed a tea towel, and attempted to mop up the blood that had soaked into his shirt.

'This was new on,' he muttered to himself.

'What the hell …' Eureka stammered, vocalising the sentiment of the room.

Austin jumped down from the counter, throwing the tea towel over his shoulder as he landed, the knife still in his hand.

'Here's the deal. You were looking for me, now you've found me. Yay! Now, you can stop looking. Go home. Have a bath and a handful of choccies, and congratulate yourselves on a job well done.'

Austin scanned the room, his eyes passing slowly over everyone until he picked his target. Theo. He took his hand and shook it.

'Theo! The brave, the bold, the creepy. Man to man, I know you're only really here because you can't get over your ex. Let her move on, man.'

His eyes moved away from Theo, taking a small moment to leave a wink with Morag.

'Iscah,' he grinned, lining up his new target. 'I hear you've had some bad news recently. Don't worry, I'm pretty sure that God always hated you.'

Iscah lunged forwards, stopping only when Austin's blade came dangerously close to her neck.

'Eureka!' he exclaimed. 'Osheen has no intention of sending you

back, and that's a good thing. I checked. Lily forgot about you pretty quickly, which is impressive considering that you were fucking everywhere. I'll send you pictures of her and her husband's honeymoon. So cute.'

Eureka gritted everything she could as Austin looked quizzically around the crowd.

'Where's Kezia?' he asked, before pointing to the metal fragment and slapping his own head, pretending to remember. 'Oh, that's right. She's popped out for a bit. Can you believe that? Her mum's name being on my time machine. Madness, hopefully.'

'What do you want?' Osheen growled slowly, pulling Austin's attention back to him. Austin held his right arm out straight, his slender fingers ready to snap.

'It's quite simple. One chance, right here, right now. Obey, or perish. I need you and this circus of misfits to stay out of my affairs. Stop travelling, leave me be, or die. Your call.'

Osheen shook his head.

'You know I can't let—'

Austin snapped his fingers.

'Come on, pick up,' Clive said as he sped upstairs, hoping desperately that nobody saw him slip out of the room when Austin appeared. He sprinted past the matter courier doors, heading for the small shuttle bay. He couldn't leave without his shuttle. He'd spent far too long restoring it.

'This is Clive,' said a Clive on the other end of the call.[fn51]

'Clive, this is Clive,' said Clive, entering the shuttle bay. 'I need a pickup; I'll send you my coordinates when I'm away from this damn place.'

'No can do, Clive,' said the other Clive. 'I'm booked solid all day. My schedule doesn't open up until this evening.'

'Clive, listen to me,' said Clive as he crawled into his own shuttle, powering it up as fast as he could. 'This is a matter of life and death. To hell with your schedule.'

The other end of the line gasped.

'Sorry, Clive,' said Clive. 'I didn't mean to say that.'

'It's too late for that now,' the other Clive said quietly. 'I knew you never liked my scheduling.'

‘I’ll call someone else,’ said Clive. ‘Is Clive available?’

‘Clive?’ the other Clive said, thinking about it. ‘No, I don’t think so. Clive might be though, try him.’

‘Clive? Good idea. Thanks, Clive,’ said Clive.

The other Clive hung up without another word. When Clive got out of this, he’d have to buy Clive a light beer. Clive’s shuttle took off, flouting several launch guidelines as it headed into the space outside *Lucas*; its automated systems corrected its course past some debris as it rocketed off into the cosmos.

Clive glanced back at *Lucas*, feeling shame for abandoning his post like this. Clives were a dutiful race, happy, even excited to help out wherever and however they were needed. For a time, he wondered if his family would even accept him again, especially if word got out that he criticised another Clive’s scheduling. Unfortunately for Clive, he’d never see his family again. Something had appeared all around him, and suddenly he was having to evade an unbelievable amount of debris. He did well for a while, but it wasn’t too long before he made the mistake that got him killed.

Another impact sent Osheen crashing into a wall, his shoulder denting a metal panel. He landed badly, distracted by failed attempts to transport everyone to the bridge. He threw a glare Austin’s way, but he was already gone.

‘MALCOLM,’ he yelled, heaving himself to his feet and ushering everyone out of the room. ‘SHIELDS. NOW.’

Malcolm shot off like a rocket, diverting himself through whatever electrical cabling got him to the bridge fastest.

‘You, you, and you,’ Osheen said, firing fingers at Theo, Iscah and Eureka. ‘Check that Alphonse is OK, find Kez and Clive, and get somewhere safe.’

Osheen didn’t wait for a reply before he sprinted out of the room, Morag and Bea following, unsure if three flights of stairs were exactly what he wanted to tackle right now.

‘Well aren’t you a vision of health,’ Austin laughed as Osheen finally entered the bridge. He hopped up from the central chair, offering it to Osheen with a bow. ‘Come on, take a seat. I was always taught to offer mine to the elderly and infirm.’

Osheen barged past Austin, taking his seat back, muttering under his

breath the entire time.

'Estimated time to active shields, twenty-one minutes,' said Malcolm, already jabbing tendrils at a wall-mounted console.

'Twenty-one?' Osheen exclaimed. 'Why so long?'

'I am diverting an enormous amount of power into artificial structural integrity,' Malcolm explained. 'The third pylon is severely damaged and we cannot let it fail.'

'I mean, you can,' said Austin, kicking the chair he was sitting in so it spun around 360 degrees. 'It'll just mean this spindly little station goes crumpling into a black hole.'

'I'm on it,' Morag said, her arms taking her out of the room at an alarming speed. Before the doors closed, a deep crash resonated through the floor, indicating that a part of *Lucas* had just been absolutely obliterated.

'Could someone please tell me what's hitting us?' Osheen barked at the room. 'What are we up against? A ship? An entire armada?'

'Exterior sensors are destroyed,' Malcolm said. 'Our attacker remains a mystery.'

'Oh my god,' yelled Austin, leaping to his feet and throwing both of his hands out in frustration. 'Just look out the fucking window! How are you all so bad at this?'

While Morag's expertise was more focused on putting biological bodies back together, commanding a swarm of nanobots to weld two hunks of space station into one wasn't outside her purview. 'Speed it up there, fellers,' she said, watching the swarm knit itself into complex structures. 'I'm a little exposed here.'

Had she stood here five minutes ago, she would have been standing in a curved walkway, with the support beams that held *Lucas* together tucked away neatly under the floor. Now, a ten-metre chunk of the walkway had been demolished, exposing the supports and allowing Morag to see just how much damage she needed to repair. It was a lot.

Morag, one arm holding her in place in this vacuum, looked intently up at the planet that had jumped into the space beside the station, or at least, what was left of it.

The jump had crippled the planet, sending monstrous cracks along its surface, with huge chunks of its crust coming away. These chunks, ranging from the size of a fist to the size of a country, were heading

towards the black hole, and thus, everything that happened to be orbiting around it.

'Come on, Malcolm,' Morag muttered. 'Get those shields up.'

Suddenly, Morag spotted a vessel weaving in and out of the debris pouring off the planet. It was a shuttle. One she recognised, having been sucked in to many boring conversations about its restoration over the years.

Clive … ?

Morag watched in horror as a piece of debris clipped the back of Clive's shuttle, sending it into a spin. A second piece hit directly, punching a hole right through it. With a gasp of horror, Morag spun around in her vat, aware of what would happen next. When a shuttle's drive was destroyed, the resulting explosion could briefly be as intense as a star, and even though the majority of modern windows could compensate for this, the closest ones to her were behind an airtight door.

Clive's shuttle detonated silently, releasing a brief yet intense sphere of brutal energy all around it, vaporising several hundred metres of rocks as it went. Intense beams of photons fled the scene, ricocheting off every surface and lighting up things that, otherwise, Morag wouldn't have spotted falling into the black hole.

'KEZ?!'

'Morag has repaired the pylon,' Malcolm updated. 'A crude fix, but nevertheless, a functional one. I now have the power to raise shields.'

With a deep hum and the explosion of several minor circuits, the shields around *Lucas* finally activated.

'They're working!' yelled Osheen with glee, both fists in the air as he watched a sparkling blue field cover the external windows of the bridge. Suddenly, a pipe burst, briefly showering the room with coolant until an exhausted handful of nanobots could seal it up.

'… more or less,' he said, slapping his workstation and spinning around to solve whatever part of his life was on fire next. It was Morag, broadcasting her face onto every unused viewscreen.

'Does a black hole slow down time the closer you get to it, or does it speed it up?' she asked, a panicked look on her face.

'Slows it down,' Osheen nodded. 'Why?'

'Kez has been falling into one for a while, and I need to know if

there is any chance she is still alive. Cheers.'

She vanished from the monitors, before shortly reappearing.

'Oh, and could one of you come get me in a bit? Thanks.'

She vanished again. For a moment at least.

'Clive's dead,' she said. 'He was fleeing and his shuttle was hit by debris. Thought you ought to know.'

Her image disappeared for a final time. Osheen turned, glaring at Austin, a sneer of hatred revealing a yellowing incisor.

'Hey, I aimed for the little girl, but the Clive wasn't me,' Austin said. 'I'm not taking the blame for that, even if it is hilarious.'

A chunk of rock hit the shields, sending a wave of energy rippling across its surface. As a result, several panels blew, sending sparks cascading down into the room like white-hot snow. 'If you have harmed a single hair on that girl's head …'

'Oh please,' scoffed Austin. 'Look outside! What do you think you could possibly—'

With a scream of rage, Alphonse entered the room. He charged at Austin on all fours, growing as large as he could in the confined space of the bridge. Before Austin could react, Alphonse was on him, pinning him to the ground, a table-sized palm forced against his face. Alphonse pushed down until a sickening pop marked the end of Austin's skull. He kept pressing until the metal floor under them both started to buckle.

'Little prick jumped me,' he growled, panting. 'Is everyone alright?'

Alphonse removed his hand, expecting to see a man that looked like a lasagne from the shoulders up. Terrifyingly, Austin looked back at him.

'I suppose that's fair,' Austin shrugged.

Detecting a recently ejected crewmember in space isn't actually all that difficult. Any opening in a ship is normally noticed thanks to a hail of alarms, screaming people, or both. Then it's a simple matter of detecting anything outside that shouldn't be there, normally something with a temperature, and dragging it back in. If the person overboard had an NPC then all the better, thanks to a built-in galaxy positioning system, the ability to broadcast emergency signals, and entertainment suites to enjoy as their eyes begin to frost over.

The rub in Kez's situation was that she was falling into a black hole.

This, rather brilliantly, slowed down time from her perspective, giving the crew of the *Lucas* a much greater opportunity to mount a rescue. Un-brilliantly it made locating her much more difficult. Black holes themselves are cold but all that swirling light and matter around them heats up rapidly. Finding Kez's body temperature among that lot was like finding a particular big shoe in an eight clown-car pileup.

This is why, as Morag spread her arms out, extending their length as far as they could go as they attached to the edges of the hole in *Lucas*'s walkway, she turned all of her monitoring devices off. She would have to eyeball this one.

When Morag was sure she was in the right place, she retracted her arms, pushing them faster than their recommended specifications, and catapulted herself at Kez at a high speed. She had to go much, much faster than her target, otherwise time would literally catch up with Kez before she got there. Too fast though, and she could essentially headbutt Kez even further into the black hole, or detonate as the two of them collided. As she approached, Morag realised that Kez wasn't exactly where she had appeared to be back on the walkway. The light falling into the black hole had caused her real position to become slightly obfuscated, like Kez was underwater. As she rocketed towards a location Kez no longer was, Morag hoped that she was at least close enough as she reached out with every one of the six limbs she had.

Austin stood, cracking his neck back into place. Congealing blood was leaking from his eyes, ears, and nose, and his hair was matted with it.

'That one's on me,' he said, wiping blood away with the back of his hand. 'You missed the earlier demonstration of my immortality. Here's the rub, big guy, I literally cannot die. Shoot me, stab me, throw me into space, I'll always spring back like a charismatic Jack-in-the-Box.'

'Permission to test the space one,' Alphonse growled. Suddenly a wave of nanobots shot from the walls, heaving him up and encasing him in a protective web. Seconds later, another picked up Malcolm and Bea, suspending them in the corners of the room.

'You bast—' Alphonse managed to croak, before a band of nanobots covered his mouth.

'Just so you clowns know, I don't respond well to threats,' Austin said, his playful tone peeling away. 'Consider this your only warning on the topic.'

Osheen, now alone with an immortal psychopath, gave up. He slumped back into his chair, clearly not caring that his hands hit several buttons as they landed on the arms. ‘I understand why you’re here,’ he said quietly. ‘You want to watch us die.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Austin said. ‘It’s just the only way to be sure that everything that could put a stop to my plans is destroyed. I can’t let you continue, I just can’t.’

‘Then let them go,’ Osheen said, indicating his crew, each one fighting to escape the webbing. ‘I built the machine, not them. They’re no threat to you.’

For a moment, Austin seemed to genuinely consider this idea, before he slowly shook it away. He wandered over to Osheen, squatted in front of him, and placed a bloodied hand on his face.

‘I can’t risk it,’ he said softly. ‘If anything, you should take this murder as a compliment. You were just too damn good to let live.’

The station shook slightly as a fragment of the planet scraped down the side of the shields, stealing a fraction of energy away as it went.

‘Then do me one favour,’ Osheen said, sitting forward. ‘Call it a runner-up prize.’

‘Anything,’ Austin whispered.

Osheen leaned forward, his forehead almost touching Austin’s. Slowly, carefully, he pointed behind him.

‘Read that.’

Austin smiled quizzically and turned to follow the directions. Behind him, a monitor was active; white text on a black background was flying down the screen, calculating something. He ambled over to the screen, hunching over it, trying to work out exactly what he was seeing. ‘Oh,’ he said softly. ‘That is going to cost you.’

‘You more,’ said Osheen, joining Austin by the monitor. ‘If your plan is to wait until we’re atomised, then you can’t rely on our matter couriers to get you home. You’ll need a ride.’

Austin watched as several contingency programs ran, presumably triggered when Osheen fell into his chair. All of them looked bad, but it was the tracer program that caught his eye the most. His return signal had been detected, and he had about a hundred seconds until Osheen discovered his origin point and broadcasted it on every single emergency Affinity bandwidth. One hundred seconds until the entire Affinity fleet showed up on his doorstep.

‘Well, I best be off,’ said Austin, bowing gracefully. ‘Lovely to meet you and your band, but I really must be going.’

‘So soon?’ Osheen asked, his voice a heady mix of sarcasm and politeness. ‘I was just about to stop the planet *and* lock this station down so hard you’ll not be able to teleport within lightyears of it.’

Austin sighed, shaking his head.

‘War it is,’ he said.

‘War it is,’ Osheen replied. ‘Now get off my station.’

Austin nodded, placing his hands behind his back and straightening his posture as he stared at Osheen.

‘One last thing,’ he smiled. ‘A joke, so we don’t end on such a gloomy note. Do you know how to kill a circus?’

Osheen shrugged. As he did, his program flickered, causing his attention to shift from Austin momentarily. Grinning, Austin made his play, snapping off the top of a spike of nanobots that had been slowly forming behind him and plunging it into Osheen’s neck, causing a spray of blood to gush over his own face. With a twist, he rotated the blade across Osheen’s throat, severing every artery, nerve and muscle he could get purchase on. Osheen gurgled slightly before falling backwards, eyes wide in shock. Austin moved to catch him on the way down, cradling him in his arms.

‘Go for the juggler,’ he whispered.

He kissed Osheen on the forehead and let him drop to the ground with a wet thud. Then, he waved at the survivors in the room and vanished, leaving the bloodied blade to shatter upon the ground, next to the corpse of Osheen Shupple.

Kez wasn’t a believer in anything in particular, certainly not herself. In the grand scheme of things, she was aware that she was the second relay runner in the team. She wasn’t going to start anything, she sure as hell wasn’t going to finish anything, but she was good at keeping things going. Chugging along. A real Tuesday of a person.

In her final seconds, she’d looked up at *Lucas*, shards of it splitting off around her in all directions, and wondered if she was wrong about herself. About her potential. Regrettably, it was too late now, but she made a promise to try harder next time. If there *was* a next time.

However, there was one thing she could do. With a flick of steadily freezing eyeballs, she transferred E-NA back to *Lucas*, stashing her away on the partition she’d eked out on the main computer. There wasn’t any need for both of them to die today.

As her last nanobots expired, ending the necessary flow of oxygen to her brain, she saw something fly past her. A kite perhaps, with a long, fluttery tail behind it. Lovely. A nice final image. It didn't make sense, not in the slightest, but that didn't matter now. She was suddenly very warm, and very comfortable.

She tried to breathe in, just for kicks, and was alarmed when something entered her lungs. It wasn't air. Air doesn't have the texture of thick jelly and the taste of hand soap, at least not any air that Kez remembered. Kez gagged, and sucked down another lungful, causing her to gag again. It was horrible, but it felt like living, and horrible living was better than any sort of dead.

Kez opened her eyes, or maybe they defrosted a smidge, and noticed that there was someone about half an inch in front of her.

'Hello,' she said, expelling some of her gooey breath back into the gooey air.

'Hello,' said Morag. 'It's good to see you breathing.'

Kez sloshed her head around, taking in the scenery. She was in a small container floating in space, with her knees pulled right up to her chest. Everything was tinted purple, including the alien who was also squashed in here. 'Am I in your vat?' Kez asked.

'Yep,' said Morag.

'Why?'

'Because you can breathe in here, and not out there.'

Confused, Kez tilted her neck and pressed her cheek against the curved glass of Morag's vat. Outside, *Lucas* was slowly floating away from them.

'Oh,' said Kez. 'I thought you'd saved me.'

'I have saved you!' Morag said, offended.

'Then why are we still falling into the black hole?'

'I saved *you*. Now someone needs to save *us*.'

Morag grinned a fanged grin as Kez tried breathing again. She coughed, causing Morag to try and squeeze even tighter into her corner.

'I really don't want to die in your vat,' Kez sputtered.

'Then cough gentler,' advised Morag. 'Don't worry, time is going faster for them in there. They'll be able to fix things up and save us before my vat runs out of power. Shouldn't be long.'

'What if they don't?' Kez said, watching the only liveable space for lightyears float slowly away and panicking appropriately.

'Then we'll freeze before we're ripped into shreds by gravitational

forces. That's days away, so relax.'

Kez turned back to Morag, the vat fluid no longer stinging her eyes.

'How are you not freaking out right now?' she asked.

'I'm from a race that explodes when we encounter any form of stress,' Morag shrugged. 'We're pretty chill.'

Kez nodded gently, turning her attention back to *Lucas*. She couldn't tell if it was speeding up, or they were.

'Do you mind if I ask you something?'

'You'd better hold it,' said Morag. 'I don't think the waste disposal could deal with human—'

'What happened between you and Theo?'

Morag tilted her head at Kez, all of her nostrils flaring.

'What do you think you know?' she asked.

'When we were on Earth, in the past, the first time around, when he thought he was dying, Theo said—'

Morag raised a wing.

'You can't tell me what he said,' she said softly. 'It would be like peeking into his diary. Those words weren't meant for me.'

'But he asked me to tell you,' Kez said. 'Surely Theo would want you to know.'

Morag smiled.

'Then, my love, he will tell me.'

Suddenly, the scenery around the two of them shifted, with space falling away and being replaced with *Lucas*'s matter courier room, complete with an endearing transparent lava creature wearing an Affinity uniform. Morag's arms immediately got to work, unscrewing the top of her vat, pulling Kez out, and placing her back onto her feet.

'Than—' Kez managed to say before her lungs started to vomit up a thick purple sludge. She gasped, coughed, vomited more, and after thirty seconds was breathing gases again.

'Well I'm going to need a top-up,' Morag said. Two thirds of her vat fluid was missing, either in space or in Kez. 'How's tricks, Alphonse?'

'And what's that noise?' Kez asked, a deep thrumming threatening to shake the paint off the walls.

Alphonse didn't say anything, he simply picked up the two of them and squeezed them in a tight embrace.

'Easy, laddie,' Morag exclaimed, her head poking out of her vat fluid. 'I'm sloshing like a bastard in here.'

'We missed you too, big guy,' Kez chuckled, trying to work out what looked different about him.

‘I’m sorry it took so long,’ Alphonse said, squeezing tighter. ‘It took us a while to recover from Austin’s attack.’

‘Austin’s attack?’ Kez exclaimed, looking between Alphonse and Morag wildly.

‘You didn’t mention that Austin was here?’ Alphonse asked Morag.

‘Austin was here?!’ Kez exclaimed, her head movements making it look like she was watching a sped-up tennis match. ‘On *Lucas*?’

‘It’s not been that long for us,’ said Morag. ‘Minutes.’

‘Of course,’ said Alphonse, shaking his head. ‘Sorry, I’ve never really got all this time nonsense. Everything with Austin happened three days ago. Long story short, he knows where we are, he knows what we’re doing, and he’s put a planet on a collision course with us.’

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ mumbled Kez, wondering if the noise she could hear was a planet about to knock her back into space.

‘It isn’t,’ said Alphonse, indicating for them to leave the room and head into the corridor. ‘Osheen managed to repel him, but he’ll be back.’

In the corridor, Kez got her first look at the planet outside, its dark blue surface almost pressed against the other side of the glass. ‘It’s not moving,’ noted Morag.

‘Osheen again,’ Alphonse nodded. ‘He always said he was ready for anything. Not only has he made it impossible to remotely teleport onto, or even near to the station, but he’s using the time machine to reverse that rock’s trajectory at a rate of one second per second. It’s locked in time, forever just a few hours away from obliterating us.’

‘That’s what the noise is,’ Morag said, noting the heavy thrumming causing her vat fluid to pulse. ‘The time machine is active.’

‘You’ll stop hearing it after a while,’ sighed Alphonse. ‘I hope so anyway.’

‘I know that planet,’ said Kez quietly, miles away, gazing out the window.

‘What was that?’ asked Alphonse.

‘It’s Ipricus,’ she said quietly. ‘The planet Jack destroyed.’

‘You sure?’ asked Alphonse.

‘I couldn’t sleep the first night so I looked it up,’ Kez muttered, before realising what this could mean and breaking eye contact with it. ‘I need to talk to Osheen, now.’

She started to run, heading for the stairs that would lead her to the bridge, or his office. Maybe his quarters. Wherever he was, she would —

‘Osheen’s dead,’ said Alphonse, holding out a hand to stop Kez as she tried to move past him. ‘Clive too. We lost all but essential systems during the attack, and I’ve taken command of *Lucas* for the foreseeable future.’

Kez looked up at Alphonse and realised exactly what was different about him. It was the way he was standing. Taller, without actually having gained any height. This was Alphonse using a skillset he hadn’t needed for a long time. This was Alphonse, the captain.

Which meant he was telling the truth.

‘How?’ asked Kez, her voice cracking slightly.

‘Austin, I’d assume,’ said Morag sadly, shaking her head. ‘That fellow is unhinged.’

Alphonse nodded, withholding the details for now. It wasn’t the time. ‘If you need to process this, I can offer you a handful of minutes,’ he said, placing a hand on Morag’s shoulder. ‘However, time is running out, and we need a plan. I’d like us to return to work as soon as possible.’

‘Does my dad know I’m alive?’ Kez asked, suddenly remembering how their last conversation ended. ‘I was talking to him when—’

‘Many systems are down,’ Alphonse interrupted softly. ‘Communications included. I’m sorry, but I’ll pre-load a message from you to send the second we’re back in contact.’

Kez nodded, before turning to Morag and nodding harder.

‘We’re OK to work,’ Morag said, offering Kez a smile. ‘Lead the way, Alphonse.’

Kez wasn’t OK, but it didn’t matter right now. Not only was Austin responsible for taking the lives of her colleagues, and apparently somehow involved in her mum’s disappearance, but now, so very far away, her dad’s heart was breaking thanks to him. With gritted teeth, Kez withdrew decades of hatred towards the Affinity, turned it slowly, and pointed it directly at Austin Lang. This meant war.

PART III

Chapter Nineteen

The Death of Venus

LUCAS | 2783

The first thing E-NA detected when she reuploaded herself was that Kez was suffocating again. This time however it wasn't from exposure to space, it was exposure to an entire crew of people hugging her and Morag at the same time.

'Thunk ooo,' Kez managed to croak.

'Don't ever do that again,' Eureka sobbed. 'Either of you!'

'Bloody brave of you, Morag,' Iscah said. 'Heroic even.'

'You two got any of that luck going spare?' Theo chuckled. 'I have a feeling we'll need it.'

The hug disbanded, allowing everyone to take their seats for the briefing.

I can't believe you tried to save my life, E-NA scoffed internally. *These lot making you soft?*

I was hoping that you'd tell everyone where I was, Kez replied internally. *Which, incidentally, you didn't.*

E-NA chuckled.

I missed you too, she said.

'Good afternoon, everyone,' Alphonse said, standing in front of the room, his tone almost unrecognisable as he spoke. 'Thanks to everyone's hard work, *Lucas* has returned to almost full functionality. Malcolm has signed off on all essential systems, and I am confident in our ability to continue with the mission.' Alphonse offered Malcolm a short nod, which was dutifully returned.

'I am beyond happy to report that Kez and Morag have returned to us, and I know I speak for all of us when I say, we bloody well missed you.'

'Happy to be back, chief,' Morag beamed, giving several thumbs up. Kez, on the other hand, gave a small, awkward wave.

'Now,' continued Alphonse. 'Our situation is fragile, yet hopeful. Thanks to the incredible work of the late Mr Shupple, the planet, which Kez has recognised as Ipricus, is suspended in time. Additionally, a powerful distortion field should prevent any and all

jump attempts to this sector of space, while leaving the time machine operations unaffected. We are safe.'

Alphonse glanced around the room, his poise unwavering. 'However, we are also trapped. The distortion field is preventing any and all communications, and the matter couriers are running at an incredibly restricted range.'

Kez raised a hand. It seemed like the sort of meeting where that was necessary. 'What about Clive's shuttle?' she asked. 'Couldn't we escape using that?'

'Destroyed,' said Alphonse, omitting currently unimportant details. 'In the attack.'

Kez nodded, lowering her hand slowly.

'The mission then,' continued Alphonse. 'Recovery of the two remaining fragments, using them to discover Austin's origin point, then neutralising him before he becomes a threat.'

Alphonse watched as the room reacted to his new mission parameters. Unsurprisingly, nobody had any objections to the word 'neutralise'.

'Your first expedition will be to Venus. Theo has agreed to brief you on-site to save time. If there are no other questions …'

A moment of silence. The last for some time.

'… go suit up. You depart in ten minutes.'

With the nod of heads and creaks of chairs, the crew of *Lucas* got to work.

As the time machine began its familiar start-up sequence, Kez had a question.

'Hang on, how can the machine send us back and still have enough energy to hold the planet at bay?'

'It can't,' said Theo, watching the turbines spin even faster than they had for the past three days. 'While we're in the past, Ipricus falls.'

'Oh,' gasped Kez, tugging on the collar of her newly repaired uniform. 'How long until it makes contact?'

'A few hours,' said Iscah, her face now the proud owner of a new scar. 'We can just about complete three trips.'

'Speaking of fine,' Theo said, reading the briefing on his NPC. 'Our return time for this trip is tight. Really tight.'

'How tight?' asked Eureka, correctly concerned.

‘We don’t come back until a second or two after the Venusian apocalypse,’ said Theo.

‘Oh,’ said Kez. ‘That tight.’

The time machine activated, launching Iscah, Kez, and Eureka into another mission, and Theo into his literal worst nightmare.

‘KEZIA,’ whispered the voice of one of the beings in the darkness.

‘You know my name?’ Kez asked, once again familiarising herself with her own memories.

‘YES,’ screamed the other one quietly.

‘How?’ asked Kez.

‘YOU TOLD US,’ the two boomed together, as Kez left this place, somehow even more clueless than when she entered it.

VENUS MINING COLONY | 2543

Roughly 100 million minutes earlier, the team arrived successfully on Earth’s closest cousin.[fn52] Immediately, someone said something wrong.

‘We’re underground,’ said Kez, trying to see anything in the pitch darkness that made up her surroundings. ‘I can feel rocks.’

‘Ow!’ said Iscah, her hand retreating back to herself. ‘They’re sharp!’

‘I can feel a wall too,’ said Theo, carefully moving away from the group. ‘It’s smooth.’

‘Could be a sensory deprivation tank,’ Eureka offered, hands outstretched and moving slowly. ‘We might be in another, slightly more dangerous spa.’

‘Anyone ever tried total sense removal?’ Iscah asked, slowly fondling her way around the rocks that surrounded the group. ‘It’s a type of therapy. A doctor overwrites your NPC implants briefly and you can feel what it’s like to exist without a body. It’s very relaxing.’

‘Hard pass,’ Kez said, wondering if she needed to activate her disguise in this darkness. ‘That sounds horrific.’

‘Morag did that to me as a prank once,’ said Theo as he tasted the air and frowned. ‘I quite liked it actually.’

Suddenly, an alarm blared, and a series of red lights lit up the area the quartet were standing in, revealing it to be a metallic corridor

housing a wide conveyor belt. With a shudder that sent everyone to their knees or arses, it began to move, slowly transporting its quarry of dark, vicious-looking rocks towards the gigantic crusher behind them.

'Bright side,' said Theo as everyone stared at the thick metal teeth that began to crush entire rocks into debris. 'At least we can see now.'

The conveyor belt sped up, and the munching of the teeth followed suit.

'RUN!' yelled Eureka as the group began to weave, dodge, and clamber over the endless stream of rocks heading their way. At the other end of the corridor, new rocks crashed into the room via a chute, vibrating the belt as they landed. There wasn't a way out.

'I don't want to die like a cartoon character!' yelled Kez, as the belt hit what she prayed was its top speed. She wanted to look back, desperate to know how far away the crushing teeth were, but knew that slowing down now could prove fatal.

'There!' yelled Theo over the tumult, pointing a finger at a handle in the ceiling, hidden among the rust. With a dexterous leap from a passing rock he became airborne, grabbed the handle, and tugged it with all of his body weight. The small hatch it was attached to swung open, causing natural light and a breeze to enter the corridor. With another hop and some unexpected upper body strength he was out, lying on the roof above, one arm outstretched to pull his crew up. 'Take my hand!' he yelled down to them, extending the offer on a first come, first served basis. Iscah was closest, using Theo's arm to effortlessly catapult herself through the hatch. Kez was second, a rock ripping a gash into a dangling ankle as she was pulled up.

'THEO!' Eureka yelled from down the conveyor belt, still struggling to get close enough to take Theo up on his offer. 'ARM!'

Theo pulled his limb up and out of the way as a particularly large rock passed, crashing through the open hatch door, ripping it from its hinges and sending it straight at Eureka's face.

She ducked, slightly too late, as the sheet of metal clanged off her skull, sending her crashing backwards onto the belt.

'EUREKA, WHERE ARE YOU?'

Eureka tried to shake off the impact. She staggered to her feet but promptly fell back down to her hands and knees, both images of the corridor that she could see orbiting each other.

'EUREKA!'

She looked behind herself at the rapidly approaching jaws. They were seconds away now, crunching relentlessly. She could feel the

debris flying out from them, peppering her back.

'Ah, shit,' she breathed into the metal of the conveyor belt.

'EUREKA!!!'

That's when everything stopped. The movement, the noise, the jaws.

'Biological life detected,' said a calm digital voice. 'For safety purposes, please contact your sector's conveyor management to resume operation.'

Eureka lay on the ground for a while longer, her breathing rapid, her thoughts locked onto one particular redhead, as they often were in times of danger. Above her, the conical teeth sparkled in the little light that entered the corridor. One more movement, and she never would have made it home.

'If anyone knew that this would happen,' Eureka eventually yelled at the heads poking down from the hatchway, 'then I want you to know that I will exact a terrible, *terrible* revenge.'

The group stood on an open-air walkway, suspended between two massive industrial structures, about a hundred metres over the rocky surface below. Directly underneath them, the conveyor belt corridor, now silent. Above them, an acid-yellow sky. Above that, the heat shield that protected the entire planet from the blistering rage of the sun.[fn53]

'You alright now?' Theo asked Eureka as she finished vomiting over the edge.

Eureka didn't say anything. She just nodded and tapped her disguise on. The rest of the group followed suit, suddenly turning each of them into a particularly heavy-duty looking member of the human race, complete with thick clothes to match, and boots over their actual boots, which clanged off the metal grating that made up the majority of the floor.

'Should we worry about turning that off?' Iscah wondered, peering back down into the corridor.

'And the vomit?' Kez asked, watching Eureka's final expulsion narrowly miss a parked truck.

'Nah,' said Theo, gazing out across the landscape. 'This whole place is an hour away from being obliterated.'

'Oh, right you are,' said Iscah, slightly unnerved.

'And on that note, welcome to Venus. It's hot, humid, and the night

shift is two hundred days long!' Theo said, holding his arms out at the barren fuck-all that made up the planet behind him, its dull brown landscape stretching out featurelessly in every direction. The only point of interest was below them, where an assortment of heavy-duty vehicles trundled between massive industrial buildings, their exact cargo a mystery from this distance.

'It's a mining planet,' whispered Theo, just making sure that everyone was on the same page.

'What are they mining?' asked Eureka, her hands still shaking. 'I thought Venus was quite dull, minerally speaking.'

'Oh it is,' nodded Theo. 'But you don't come to Venus to mine Venus.'

'Then what are they mining?'

'That,' Theo said with a smile, pointing towards the sky.

The group looked up and noticed that the thick atmosphere above them had parted, and a colossal asteroid was heading towards the planet.

'Woah,' whispered Kez, as next to her Iscah did a sign over her chest and muttered something in a long dead language.

'It's so slow,' said Eureka, as the asteroid, roughly half a kilometre in size, impacted the planet several miles away from where they stood. Instead of making a very large dent in the planet and wiping away the group in a cataclysm of energy, the asteroid was gently placed onto the surface, cracking apart as it landed and crumbling over a large area.

'Ears,' said Theo, covering his.

'What?' asked Kez, getting halfway through the syllable before the sound of a mountain falling down crashed over them all.

'FUCK ME,' Eureka yelled over the rumbling. 'BIT LOUD.'

'THERE'S AN ENERGY FIELD AROUND THIS PLACE,' Theo yelled back. 'IT DAMPENS NINETY PER CENT OF THE SOUND.'

'WHY ISN'T IT WORKING?!'

'IT IS WORKING!'

After thirty seconds the cacophony had departed over the horizon, and normal conversation was again possible.

'The asteroid belt in our solar system is resource rich, but *really* hard to mine,' Theo explained. 'After finding a good rock you've got to fuck about in space with drills and zero gravity, using up fuel and fidgeting around as other asteroids constantly threaten to crash into you. Then, you've got to lug everything home and, ugh, it's just a faff.'

'So the solution is to just crash them here?' Eureka asked.

‘Basically,’ Theo nodded. ‘Shatter them on a world nobody cares about, collect the good bits, and trash the rest.’ He pointed up, towards the slowly filling hole in the clouds, at a faint blue ring hovering in the sky, surrounded by a handful of starships in a very low orbit. ‘That there is called the net. There are six of them in a circle around this base, and a few hundred bases around the planet. They add resistance as the asteroids are sent through, slowing them down and converting the asteroid’s own potential and kinetic energy into power for the base, stored in batteries out there in the deserts. Real clever stuff.’

On the ground, the front of one of the bigger buildings had opened up, and a fleet of vehicles began to head to the newly crashed asteroid.

‘So what happens today?’ Eureka asked, looking down at the hundreds of tiny human specks. ‘What goes wrong?’

‘For this base, it’s delivery day. Over a twenty-four-hour period, all six nets have an asteroid arrive, sent from the belt a few weeks back,’ said Theo, gripping the corroded guard rail tightly as he spoke. ‘They’re all pretty normal, but the last one is a timebomb, literally. It’s core is full of kifoium.’

‘Is that an element?’ asked Eureka. ‘I’ve not heard of it.’

‘You’ve never heard of it because it’s impossible,’ said Theo. ‘It’s the sort of stuff that a particle accelerator the size of Saturn’s rings could create for a fraction of a fraction of a second. It’s from the really *weird* corner of the periodic table.’[fn54]

‘So how is it in the core?’ Eureka asked.

Theo shrugged.

‘For the longest time the Affinity thought it was an attack. We were on high alert for almost a decade. Then, one scientist worked out the radioactive decay pattern and … that was that. Kifoium. Too impossible to be anything but a fluke of nature.’

‘You don’t believe them?’ asked Iscah.

‘I did,’ said Theo. ‘Until today.’

‘Because we’re here?’ asked Kez.

Theo nodded.

‘Because we’re here.’

Nervously, Kez glanced up at the sky. Thick clouds billowed rapidly, obscuring her view of the last rock to hit Venus.

‘In about an hour the asteroid enters the atmosphere,’ continued Theo. ‘As it lands the kifoium ignites and it explodes. As it explodes, it breaks down into other elements, and they explode. Those elements break down further and … guess what?’

‘They explode?’ guessed Eureka.

‘They explode,’ nodded Theo. ‘All of this, in the blink of an eye. You could see the flash from Earth, during the day.’

‘And we have to survive this for potentially a couple of seconds,’ said Iscah. ‘How?’

‘Two ways,’ said Theo. ‘Either the energy released impacts the beacon signal, distorting it in our favour. Or, we get on a ship.’

Theo pointed at a series of landing pads that ran around the exterior of the main building. Four starships sat, some industrial, some sleek, most of them connected to large refuelling cables, and all of them covered in a thick layer of Venusian dust.

‘We’ve got some options,’ Kez sighed thankfully.

‘That’s a lot of ships for a bunch of people with teleporters,’ said Eureka.

‘They’re only shuttles, taking people to the space station in orbit,’ explained Theo. ‘The atmosphere here is beyond thick, the planet is full of explosions, and occasionally a metalstorm rolls in. It’s safer to go retro.’

‘A metalstorm?’ asked Eureka.

‘It’s as it sounds,’ said Theo. ‘You explode metal into the air all day, eventually it’s going to get swept up into the weather patterns.’

‘So which ship is our target?’ asked Iscah, really hoping it wasn’t the clapped-out old yellow one.

‘The clapped-out old yellow one,’ said Theo, pointing to the third landing pad.

‘And you’re on board?’ asked Eureka.

‘Seven-year-old me,’ Theo nodded. ‘School trip on a public shuttle. We had a tour, saw a few asteroids come in, then went home. I don’t remember much of it to be honest.’

‘Seems like a risk,’ said Iscah. ‘Being that close to your past self. Why not one of the other ships?’

‘Because,’ said Theo darkly, ‘only one ship makes it out of here today.’ The group looked down at the shuttle. It could maybe fit a hundred people, a hundred and fifty tops.

‘How many people work here?’ asked Iscah quietly.

‘Few thousand per plant,’ said Theo, watching more people than could ever fit in the ship walk around below him. ‘Today is a dark day in the history books.’

Suddenly, the beacon beeped, indicating the arrival point of the next temporal schism. Theo stared at the readout before jerking his head to

the sky.

'It's already here!' he yelled, pointing unnecessarily as a large explosion in the sky shoved nearby clouds out of the way. Moments later a bang followed, utterly lost in the noise of the plant. Something fell, sailing down from the atmosphere, past the group on the walkway, and landing with a plume of dust on the ground, thirty storeys below.

'I hope this place has a lift,' Eureka sighed, as the four of them ran downstairs to collect their prize.

'Eighteen, nineteen, twenty …'

Paula Marques was counting students as they climbed onboard the yellow transport shuttle, tapping each one gently on the head as they walked past her. This was unnecessary, as their school uniforms contained trackers, but Paula had learned long ago to not trust any technology that a child could easily lose.

'Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four.'

The heads ran out, causing her to sigh. One missing.

She mounted the stairs, leaned her head around the corner, into the body of the ship, and called out to her co-worker, who at that moment was trying their best to wrangle children into their seats.

'One missing, Mx Hoffman,' she said over the sounds of giggling and nose picking.

'Theo Garnett?' they asked without looking, their attention taken up by fiddly safety harnesses and wriggling occupants. Paula glanced around the shuttle briefly, noticed that everyone was paired up properly, nodded, and went on a hunt for him.

'Bollocking fuck,' Theo said, looking down at the remains of the temporally displaced item. 'Someone's run over the fucking thing!'

Run over was an understatement. Clearly, several tonnes of heavy-duty mining equipment had crushed whatever this had once been into fragments and dust.

'Looks like some electronics,' Iscah said, coming to a halt next to Theo.

'That bit is definitely a screen,' Kez said as she made it to the landing site, slightly out of breath. 'Or rather, was.'

Theo bent down and carefully scooped up the remains, taking care to not leave a single fragment behind.

'Any components you recognise, Eureka?' he asked, without realising that she was still about fifty metres from where the three of them stood, cursing the fruit juice she'd had that morning for breakfast.

'I'm pretty sure that little rectangle is digital storage,' she said between heavy breaths a minute later. 'I've seen other devices like it in museums.'

'Could we recover any data from it?' Iscah wondered. 'Pictures? Messages? Locational information? That sort of thing?'

'I might be able to rig something up to read it,' Kez nodded. 'It'll just be a few yottabytes of rudimentary binary code, right?'

'Gigabytes,' Eureka panted. 'There on the side. Two GB. Gigabytes.'

'Oh,' giggled Kez, unimpressed. 'I could probably read the data off it from here.'

Eureka suddenly felt very, very old. This feeling didn't last long, as another asteroid had recently landed behind one of the towering buildings that surrounded the group, surprising them with thirty seconds of deafening noise.

'Well, as your twat-in-charge, I vote we skedaddle as soon as possible,' Theo said. 'The bigger the distance between us and this planet, the better.'

The group nodded and began running back the way they had come, with the exception of Eureka who genuinely considered dying in the dust as a preferable alternative to moving her burning limbs with any sort of speed.

As Paula entered one of the visitor overlooks, she happened to witness a miracle of modern science for the fourth time that day. Without warning, millions of tonnes of rock and metal came slowly crashing down in the distance, perfectly framed by the curved glass that enveloped the front of this viewpoint. A colossal plume of dust blew out in every direction and, after a few moments, all that could be seen were a couple of bursts of lightning crackling away under the skin of this newly formed haze. She felt small, but part of something powerful.

'Hi, Mrs Marques!'

A voice from the back of the room, high pitched and a bit sniffly, indicated that she'd found her mark. Theo Garnett was standing by the

back wall, facing away from the explosion, absorbed in what he was watching.

'What did I say about wandering off, Theo?' Paula said, walking over and squatting down beside him. 'Did you not hear the call to leave?'

Little Theo shook his head, causing his dark, curly hair to jiggle on top of his head. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Marques,' he said, looking at her with puppy-dog eyes. 'I'll just say goodbye.'

With that, he turned back to the small desk, half built into the wall that he was staring over on his tiptoes. 'Bye, Lucas!'

Paula glanced over the desk which would usually be staffed by a visitor liaison. Nobody was there, and Theo was saying goodbye to that nobody. 'Theo,' she asked softly. 'Who's Lucas?'

Theo pointed a sticky finger over the desk, straight at a small bowl of water and its inhabitant on the far wall. 'Lucas!' he beamed.

Paula breathed a sigh of relief.

'Lucas is a fish,' she smiled.

Theo nodded, hard.

'A shubunkin,' he said. 'I told the man here that he needed a bigger tank for him before he turned two, or he'll not be happy.'

'You know a lot about fish?' Paula asked, causing Theo to monologue the entire journey back to the shuttle.

'… but they'll live fifteen years if you take care of them properly!' Theo eventually concluded.

'OK,' said Paula, who had taken approximately none of that in. 'You're a very clever boy, aren't you?'

Theo nodded and scampered up the stairs to the ship, slightly tripping over a couple of them. At the top, he turned back to her.

'I had a lovely time today, Mrs Marques.'

Paula's heart lit up. She didn't know it, but every comment like that added three more months to her career.

'Did you enjoy watching the asteroids?' she smiled.

Theo thought about that for a moment, as if he wasn't expecting to be asked about the entire point of the visit.

'No,' he said. 'I liked Lucas though. I wish I could have taken him home with me.'

And, with that, he vanished onto the ship.

The overwhelming call of motherhood made Paula briefly consider fish-napping Lucas, before common sense took back the wheel. She chuckled to herself and began to board the ship, where she too tripped over the top step, but only because a voice suddenly piped up from

behind her.

'Room for a few more?' asked an odd-looking man standing at the foot of the stairs with a few friends of his, beaming and panting in equal measure.

'This is going to go wrong,' Kez said, watching the ground crew connect the ship to various cables from her claustrophobically small seat. 'It's been too easy so far.'

'We know for a fact that this flight leaves safely,' said Iscah, twisting round in her seat to reassure Kez. 'We should be fine from here on out.'

'Maybe this was too risky a location for Austin to travel to,' whispered Theo from the seat next to Iscah. 'The planet is about to explode you know.'

'Then why did one of the rifts open here?' Kez asked. 'A place in your history?'

'It's the single biggest release of energy this system has ever or will ever see,' Iscah said. 'It may have acted like a lightning rod to the machine's fragments.'

'We're all missing a key detail,' Eureka said with a smirk. 'Theo's just a lucky sod.'

'Huh?' asked the little boy over the aisle next to Eureka. 'Did you say my name?'

Silence, or the closest equivalent on a shuttle full of children, fell across the group.

'No, no,' said Theo to Theo in a panic. 'She was talking to me. My name's … uh … Squeeo.'

'Squeeo?' Iscah whispered.

'Shut it,' Theo whispered back.

'Nobody in the universe is called Squeeo.'

'It had to rhyme with Theo!'

'Then use Leo!'

Theo glanced nervously at his younger self, smiled, and went back to freaking out.

'This is weird,' he muttered.

'Do you remember any of this?' Kez asked.

'No,' said Theo. 'Unsurprisingly, later events take precedence in my memory.'

'Think,' said Kez. 'Did anything happen on this shuttle?'

Theo shook his head, then froze. A memory had flared up in his mind. Instantly he stood, clapped the palm of his hand to the side of his mouth, and blew into it hard. The resulting noise reverberated across the interior of the ship, until it was drowned out by the sound of children laughing.

'That,' he said with a smile. 'That's what I remember.'

'Anything the problem here?' Paula asked, looming over the group in the way that only teachers on a school trip can.

'All good,' said Theo with a grin. 'Just entertaining the troops.'

'It's a long trip,' Paula smiled. 'Don't run out of material before we're in orbit.'

Her gaze lingered on Theo a moment longer, before she gave him another, softer smile and moved down one more row of seats.

'You look familiar,' she said, tilting her head at Eureka. 'Do I know you from somewhere?'

Eureka flicked her eyes past the teacher, to the wall plaque with her own name on it. This was after her time, of course she might have been recognised. She gripped her armrest tightly, her heart beginning to pound.

'I'm not sure—'

Paula snapped her fingers. She'd worked it out.

'Janet Lamb!' she exclaimed. 'From that big gym in north Enceladus! You ran the holoercise class!'

Eureka shot Kez a confused look, but double-took when she saw her own reflection in the shuttle window. She'd forgotten about the disguise. 'Ah, not me I'm afraid,' Eureka said with some relief. 'A lot of people say they recognise me from places.'

'Oh, sorry, love,' said Paula. 'You must just have one of those faces.'

Paula walked away, immediately spotting a piece of litter flying above the seats and moving in on its owner.

'Smooth,' nodded Kez as Eureka struggled to get her heart rate back under control.

'You're the one who said it's all about to go tits up!' she hissed. 'This is like waiting for a jump-scare.'

'I'm pretty sure my primary education teacher just gave me a flirtatious look,' Theo muttered to himself. 'That's it, I surrender. Austin wins.'

'Calm yourselves,' whispered Iscah, firing un-flirtatious looks off in a multitude of directions. 'Everything's fine.'

'If it's all fine, why haven't we taken off yet?' asked Eureka, now

slightly rocking.

'That's a point,' said Theo, glancing around before spotting his old teacher and raising a hand out of instinct. 'Mx Hoffman?'

Around Theo, three pairs of eyes glared at him for the mistake. In front of him, one pair walked over, slightly bemused.

'Bit tall to be in my class,' they chuckled. 'You an old boy of the school?'

'Well …' Theo said, trying desperately to not look at his younger self, doubly so as he was currently picking his nose. 'I heard a kid call you that and it seemed more personable than "Oi"!'

'Excellent recovery,' Iscah muttered under her breath.

'I was wondering if you know why we haven't taken off yet?' Theo asked. 'We should be in orbit by now, no?'

'We should be,' nodded Mx Hoffman. 'The captain just informed me that power has been temporarily diverted to a different ship. Sorry to say, but we won't be leaving for an hour or two.'

It's a testament to Osheen's engineering skills that Mx Hoffman immediately noticed that this group of burly passengers suddenly all looked very ill.

'You lot got somewhere to be?' they asked. 'A connection from the space station?'

'We'd rather not be late,' Iscah nodded.

'Well,' said Mx Hoffman, giving a warm, teacherly smile that only the very best educators can pull off. 'Take it from someone with more years on the clock than you. Being late isn't the end of the world.'

With that they patted a headrest and left the group to consider their upcoming, inevitable doom.

'I'll never understand you,' Second-in-Command Fulton Godber said, resting his feet up on the cockpit of the shuttle. 'We could be on final approach by now.'

The captain didn't reply. She just sat there, silently staring at the instrumentation, hands in her lap.

'You've put us third in the queue for recharge,' Fulton continued. 'Third! Why? We're ready to go.' The captain didn't move. She didn't make eye contact. Fulton wasn't convinced she was even breathing.

'What's up with you?' Fulton asked, taking his feet off the cockpit and nearly clipping a few vital switches. 'These past few weeks you've

just closed off. What aren't you telling me?'

'You weren't supposed to be here today,' the captain said, eyes still forward. 'You were supposed to be off-grid by now. Away from it all.'

'I wanted to be!' chuckled Fulton. 'Clara just wasn't into the idea of ditching the galaxy and heading off into space in a tiny shuttle. Exploration just isn't her thing.'

'Clara,' the captain repeated bitterly.

'What is it, Neve?' Fulton asked, taking her hand in his. 'We've been flying this rust bucket for years and I've never known you to be like this.'

For the first time today, the captain looked at him. With a shake of her head she withdrew her hand along with her gaze.

'If you could know one thing about your future, what would it be?' the captain asked.

Fulton exhaled deeply, racking his brains for an interesting enough answer to keep this sliver of conversation going.

'When will I die,' he said with a slightly uncomfortable chuckle. 'I was never one for surprises.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah,' Fulton nodded.

'It's today.'

The sincerity of the captain's words caused a chill to play across Fulton's spine, as if he was slowly falling backwards into an ice bath.

'If this is a joke, I'm not getting it,' he said.

With two flicks of her index finger, the captain locked the doors to the cockpit and activated the solar protection, darkening the windows.

'Neve,' Fulton said slowly. 'I'm really not comfortable right now.'

'If it's any consolation,' the captain said, rising to her feet and stepping around the back of her chair, 'neither am I.'

'What are you doing?' Fulton yelled, watching as the captain overrode the safety settings. 'Stop this at once!'

The captain didn't stop. Correctly fearing for his life, Fulton bolted for the door, screaming in panic as he thumped on its surface. Beyond it, the laughter and noise of children drowned him out. His last words were lost in the cacophony of play.

With the press of a button, the captain teleported Fulton to the surface, right into the middle of an oncoming metalstorm. A barrage of rock and ore slivers driven by intense winds began to tear through his body, grating away his skin and exposing blood and bone. Within ten seconds he was dead. Within sixty, nothing was left of him.

Back at the ship, the captain reported Fulton as staying behind to assist with another vessel's maintenance. She then pulled a panel off the wall, activated the hidden computer underneath it, and ticked off her objective for that day.

'Dammit,' she sighed, heartbroken.

'DAMMIT!' Theo yelled, clutching the noop of his elbow in pain. 'What is this window made of?'

'I told you that was a dumb idea,' Kez said, flipping open a panel on the thickly armoured truck with a liberated screwdriver. One blur of wires later, and the doors clicked open.

'Misspent youth?' Iscah asked, wrenching the passenger door open.

'A circuit is a circuit,' Kez shrugged, closing the panel.

'Come on, Eureka,' Iscah yelled across the parking bay as she fell into the passenger seat. 'If we don't get that spaceship fuelled, we've got a real temporal mess on our hands.'

'Also, we'll be dead,' Theo muttered, familiarising himself with the truck's controls that lay in front of him.

'Yeah, that too,' added Iscah.

'Got it!' exclaimed Eureka from a nearby panel. 'Starship refuel is connected to the battery bank at sector D. It's due north of here, just before the asteroid net.'

'Hey,' said Kez, pointing her screwdriver at a low podium by a wall. 'That's a teleporter! Why don't we use it?'

'It's an older system,' said Eureka, recognising the tech. 'It could get us out there, but it can't bring us back. We need transport.'

'So we drive there, divert all the power we can, and allow all the ships to charge simultaneously,' said Iscah, fiddling with the multi-strapped harness. 'Then get back on board before we get blown to smithereens.'

'It's going to be tight,' said Kez, jabbing at the navigation system panel on the front dashboard of the truck. 'Ten minutes there, ten back. Twenty-five until our time runs out.'

'SHIT!' exclaimed Theo, hitting the wheel in frustration. 'Speaking of fuel, this one is dry. Everyone out.'

With a multitude of swear words, the group began to quickly disembark.

'Think you can get us into this one, Kez?' Iscah asked, pointing at a

large digger nearby.

'I don't think we'd make it in time with that thing's top speed,' Kez said, jogging through the garage. 'How about—'

The rev of an engine and the squealing of tyres cut Kez off mid-sentence. Behind her, the supposedly fuel-barren truck drove off suddenly, crashing through a barricade and drifting out into the plains of the planet.

'He's going to get himself killed,' Eureka spat in frustration.

'Yeah,' said Kez, bending down to pick up the beacon and time machine remains off the floor. 'I'm pretty sure he knows.'

Oh well done, idiot, Theo thought to himself as he bombed along Venus, kicking a large quantity of it up into the oxygenated air behind him. *You've had nightmares about dying on Venus since you were a kid, now you're making them a reality.*

Theo looked out of the thin viewscreen as he passed by the last of the main hub's buildings, entering the desert at speed. To his left, a metalstorm that could rip him apart in seconds was advancing in his direction. Above, unseen, an asteroid that could do it faster.

With a flick of his eyes he brought up an apocalypse ETA, leaving it sitting in the corner of his vision. He had twenty-two minutes remaining.

Fabulous, Theo thought, pressing his foot harder into the truck's floor.

'Theo?' asked a crackling voice through the truck's communication system. 'Can you hear us?'

A particularly large bump sent Theo bouncing in his seat. In the back of the truck, he heard the clinking of glass. 'I'm rather busy,' he said, as he crashed through a series of cones, receiving several rude hand gestures in return.

'We're working on a way to get you back,' said Iscah, 'Hold tight and —'

'No!' yelled Theo into the dashboard, uncertain where the radio was. 'Run to that ship and be ready to leave as soon as possible.'

'Theo …'

'It's the only way to keep you guys alive,' Theo said, his voice just about audible over the sound of an angry engine. 'To keep me alive.'

'The beacon's range—'

‘I know you’ll leave me behind, and that’s OK,’ Theo said, his voice cracking. ‘I’ve lived too long anyway.’

Iscah didn’t reply. The static in her place said it all.

‘You know why I chase danger?’ Theo asked the static. ‘Why I’m always inches from death? I just want to know what it’s like. I want to taste it, to sample a fraction of it before I commit. With my body healing in the way that it does, death is essentially my choice. I just wanted to know what I’m getting myself into, that’s all.’

The truck crashed over terrain that threatened to shake its chassis apart, dislodging the rear-view mirror from its housing. Theo glanced at it, catching a look at his own reflection. He frowned.

‘Theo, we can—’

The radio died as Theo’s foot came into contact with the truck’s dashboard. He kicked it a few more times for good measure, sending scraps of plastic cascading into the footwell.

Just get on the damn shuttle, he thought as he sped on. *Please.*

Gary was nodding off in the Venusian heat, his head resting on his shoulder as he slowly spun around in his cheap office chair. Every now and then he’d open his eyes, check that the battery lights were green, as they always were, and then he’d nod back off again. He didn’t worry that a supervisor or manager might show up at this isolated hub because, quite honestly, he was sure nobody actually knew he was out here.

‘I need to divert some power!’ exclaimed Theo as he came sliding into the room, his momentum giving the friction between his shoes and the smooth floor something to think about. Gary leapt to his feet with a yell, saluting until he realised it wasn’t necessary.

‘Oh, yes, OK,’ Gary said, his words stumbling about as much as him. ‘You the new health and safety manager?’

‘Yes, first day, hello,’ said Theo, squeaking over to the controls that Gary’s chair was rotating by. Beyond them, behind a thick glass wall, sat several enormous batteries, each one falling away from view into the cavern-like room. ‘Looks all good in here, I just need to check a few things.’

Gary watched as the new health and safety manager quickly swiped his way through various menus, swearing a little too much for a professional environment.

‘Here,’ said Theo, jabbing at the sector map. ‘I need you to divert power from these buildings into the launch bays.’

Gary rubbed his eyes and stared at the control panel, struggling to un-blur it.

‘Can’t do that I’m afraid,’ he said, poking a pudgy finger at the map. ‘These cables here are out of service. Some assh— I mean, *an employee* damaged them a few days ago. The launch pads are on reserve power only, hence the delays.’

Theo traced the remaining cables with his finger. To his dismay, only one option remained.

‘You’re telling me that the only place we can pull power from is the other launch pads?’

Gary nodded. Theo slammed a fist onto the desk, causing a cold cup of tea to ripple.

‘Can we see how much more charging each of these ships need to take off?’ asked Theo. ‘I only need them to make it to orbit, they can be picked up from there.’

‘Uhh … sure,’ said Gary, mentally flicking through a very thick manual he’d read some time ago. ‘If I do this …’

Percentages, time limits, and schematics filled the large screen in front of Theo. He had access to a huge quantity of power, but thanks to the damaged cables there was nothing he could do with it. He took a step back, plans bubbling up in his brain and bursting one by one, as if his own internal logic was playing whack-a-mole with ideas. By the time the last one bubbled up and popped, he had only a single remaining thought. He grabbed Gary’s chair and threw it at a wall, yelling violently.

‘You’re telling me,’ Theo said through gritted teeth, a string of saliva sitting on his bottom lip, ‘that if I switch power to that shuttle, everyone on board the ship that’s currently charging dies? I kill hundreds of people, just to keep this fucking timeline straight? To keep myself alive? I have to kill a shuttle full of people today? Is that fair? IS THAT FUCKING FAIR?!’

Theo slumped against a wall and slid down into his own knees. He wrapped his arms around his head and sobbed.

‘Not on your first day, no,’ said Gary quietly.

‘He should be there by now,’ Eureka said, leaning against the shuttle.

‘Anything?’

‘No power yet,’ Kez said, monitoring from the landing pad’s panel. The long cables that snaked into the shuttle were perfectly silent.

Iscah turned the beacon over in her hands, an anxiety stomach ache bubbling over inside of her. ‘If we don’t get power in a few minutes, he’s not going to make it back in time,’ she said. ‘We should go out and meet him halfway.’

‘There are hundreds of identical trucks out there,’ Eureka said, watching a dozen of them pootle about in the distance. ‘We’d have no idea which—’

‘Power!’ Kez yelled suddenly as green lights filled her screen and a low hum filled the air. ‘It’s charging! He’s only gone and bloody done it!’

‘Right, you two get on board,’ Eureka said with a clap of her hands. ‘I’ll wait here for Theo.’

‘No,’ said Kez sternly. ‘I’m waiting for him.’ Unsure where to put herself, she decided to lean on the shuttle next to Eureka, matching her cross-armed stance. It took her a moment to realise that Eureka was looking at her, smiling.

‘Hi?’ Kez said, wondering what the attention was for.

‘You remind me of younger me,’ Eureka said. ‘A proper little miscreant, leaning against a shuttle, ready to take on the world.’

‘I don’t think I’m ready to take on the world,’ said Kez, trying not to blush.

‘Ah, not me then,’ Eureka said. ‘You’re smarter.’

‘What’s going on out there?’ Iscah said, pointing towards an approaching wall of dust, heading towards them from the desert beyond.

‘Warning,’ said a computerised voice over a loudspeaker. ‘Metalstorm approaching. Remain indoors.’

As the message repeated, a yellow haze rose up around the landing pads, shielding them from the upcoming weather. The trio watched as the workers below began to scramble for the closest entrance. ‘A lot of people are going to die today,’ Iscah said quietly. ‘I wish we could help more of them.’

‘If only we could ring a fire bell or something,’ Kez sighed. ‘Call for an evacuation. Bundle everyone who can make it in time onto the shuttle.’

‘It won’t be everyone,’ said Iscah. ‘But at least some would—’

Iscah was cut off by a blaring alarm that pierced across the Venusian

air. Bright red lights joined the affray, spinning wildly in their mounts.

'Evacuate! Evacuate!' yelled the computerised voice. 'All personnel initiate evacuation procedure. Shuttle pilots, prepare for overcapacity take off.'

Kez and Iscah turned towards the doorway that led to the interior of the building, where a miscreant was standing, a big smile on her face.

'Fuck it,' shrugged Eureka, shattered glass by her feet, her hand on a little red lever. 'Might as well give them a chance.'

'—and you're sure it's going to explode?' Gary asked, as he and Theo sprinted towards a dreadfully parked truck.

'One hundred per cent,' said Theo, skidding to a halt by the door. 'Awful day to become a health and safety manager.'

Gary nodded in a panic as he boarded the truck. Before he was fully seated, Theo slammed his foot to the floor, sending a signal through the truck to get a fucking move on. A signal that the vehicle apparently ignored.

'The hell?' Theo said, slamming his foot over and over again. The power was on, but nothing on the dashboard was lighting up, save for almost every error indicator. Theo flung himself out of the truck, kicked open the bonnet, and stared in dismay at what he saw.

'The hell?' he said, bewildered, as he stared at what was left of the engine. A pile of solid slag.

'The hell?' asked Gary, as he glanced in too. 'Why has your car melted?'

For a moment, both men stared at the remains of the engine, unsure what was going on for totally different reasons. Theo felt the first few flakes of metal land on his uniform and slowly start burning their way towards his skin.

'What now?' Gary asked, as Theo began to slowly walk around the back of the truck.

'Now?' said Theo, opening the boot and pulling out the bottles he'd heard clinking earlier. 'I believe the phrase is, smoke 'em if you've got 'em.'

'If everyone could just move down to the front of the shuttle, we'll be able to fit more on!' Paula shouted over the sudden influx of people

that had boarded her specifically chosen, non-rush-hour shuttle.

'There are more seats and spaces upstairs!' Mx Hoffman yelled, once again running a headcount of the children, all of whom seemed frightened, except Theo, who was checking everyone who came on board, eyes peeled for a finned friend.

'They're running out of space in there,' Iscah said, squeezing off the shuttle and back onto the launchpad. 'We should get on soon.'

'He'll be here,' said Kez, unmoving. 'Let's give him five more minutes.'

Another six people ran past her, boarding her ever-filling escape vessel. Kez bit the inside of her cheek to steady her nerves.

'Five more minutes,' she repeated.

'To my gang back at base,' Theo cheered, thrusting a bottle up into the air and accidentally spilling some onto the battery hub's floor. 'Remember me in song or don't bother remembering me at all.'

'To Elke in Mineral Logistics!' said Gary, clinking his bottle off Theo's as the metalstorm outside crashed against his little hut. 'Sorry I called your boyfriend a prick.'

'Was he being a prick?'

'Nah,' said Gary after a swig. 'I liked her and was trying to undermine him.'

'To honesty,' smiled Theo, offering Gary a clink. 'Even when it's difficult.'

Gary took up Theo's offer, finished his second bottle, and placed it neatly down by his side. Theo threw his feet up onto a nearby panel, accidentally activating the main external viewscreen.

'Man, that's a storm,' said Theo, leaning forward to take a look at the swirling metal screaming about outside. 'Wouldn't want to be out in that.'

'It's a good thing nobody lives out here,' said Gary. 'I'd hate to have to shovel molten metal off my driveway on a morning.'

Theo's chuckle transformed into a sigh. He slid down in his chair, knowing that any minute now he was going to die. Two hundred and forty-seven years of life, love, and adventure were up. Never again would he meet a new creature, wake to a new dawn, or even take a shower. It was over. All of it. No more breaths. No more heartbeats. No more surprises.

‘Who’s Austin Lang?’ Gary asked.

Maybe one more surprise then.

‘How do you know that name?’ Theo whispered, his eyebrows almost forming an ‘X’ on his face.

‘You’ve got a note,’ said Gary, waving about an unfolded piece of paper that had been tucked under one of the bottles. ‘It says, “To Theo, better luck next time, Austin Lang”. Then some kisses.’

Theo chuckled. He’d been beaten, utterly, but he couldn’t help but appreciate the play.

‘Someone you know?’ Gary asked.

‘Not really,’ Theo shrugged.

‘Your dentist or something?’ Gary offered.

Theo watched the viewscreen, where rampaging metal began to shred the paintwork of the vehicle he’d rode in on. It was built to keep its occupants alive during a storm, but it wouldn’t drive away after one.

Suddenly, he sat bolt upright.

‘Gary,’ he asked, pointing at the viewscreen. ‘Is this camera recording?’

‘Always,’ said Gary, placing his bottle down on a coaster. Sure, the entire planet was about to be wiped out, but good manners never die.

‘Flick through the last few minutes, after I arrived.’

Gary nodded, rewound the footage, and started to speed through it. For a while, there was nothing. Theo pulled up, parked dreadfully, and ran inside. Then …

‘Who’s that?’ asked Gary, pointing at the hooded figure who had just appeared out of nowhere. With deft movements they opened the bonnet, poured a vial of something over the engine, tucked a note under the drinks in the boot, bowed to the camera, and vanished. Seconds later their footprints faded from the surface of the planet, as if they were never there.

‘My dentist,’ muttered Theo as the apocalypse countdown in the corner of his eye hit three minutes.

‘I wonder how they transported away?’ Gary said, taking a sip of steadily warming beer. ‘There’s no site-to-site this far out.’

‘Personal teleporter probably,’ said Theo, swigging from his bottle. ‘I’d also bet that this is the asshole who severed your cables.’

‘Nah,’ Gary said, flicking the footage back to the moment the visitor disappeared. ‘See the way that dust is distorted behind him? Does that spacetime fold look like a personal teleporter to you?’

It didn't look like anything to Theo, but he didn't want to say anything that would break Gary's flow.

'I bet if I search for a power drain at that exact moment …' Gary said, fiddling with his panels again. Seconds later he had a result. 'There it is, big power spike. Neat little trick: overclock the transporter at the base and its range increases far enough to grab you from further out. It'll cause damage, and any more than a single person at a time could cause serious malfunctions, but I don't think that bloke cares.'

A familiar fire licked through Theo's heart. Hope.

'Gary …' Theo said, standing slowly with a grin on his face.

'Yeah?'

'I think Austin Lang just gave us a way out. Do you know what that means?'

'Not at all,' Gary replied truthfully.

Theo placed his drink down. Two minutes until the end of the world. One idea. Zero margin for error.

'It means we've got a bus to chase.'

The shuttle's engines fired, beginning its launch sequence and forcing Eureka, Kez, and Iscah to cover their ears as ridiculous levels of energy were forced out into the air. 'THAT'S IT,' yelled Eureka, 'WE'VE GOT TO GO!'

'TEN MORE SECONDS!' Kez replied. 'HE'LL MAKE IT!'

'KEZ!' screamed Iscah. 'NOW OR NEVER!'

'HE'LL BE HERE!' shouted Kez, her voice lost in the roar of the engines. At the top of the shuttle stairs, Paula was holding on for dear life, waving at the three of them to board. The green lights around the stairs turned red, indicating that it was about to fold away.

Eureka and Iscah nodded to each other and grabbed one of Kez's arms each, pulling her onto the ship. 'NO!' she yelled. 'I'M NOT LEAVING HIM! NOT AGAIN!'

Suddenly, the severely distorted air around them buffeted, indicating the use of a teleporter. Eureka, Iscah, and Kez froze, staring at the man who just appeared in front of them.

'HELLO,' yelled Gary over the engines. 'IS THIS THE SHUTTLE THEO WAS ON ABOUT?'

Theo's head was ringing, probably from the impact it had just had with a wall. The moment that Gary had vanished, the battery banks blew, sending a pulse of pressure crashing through the dividing window, taking Theo off his feet and plunging the entire room into darkness.

'Shit …' Theo groaned as he got back to his feet. 'Shit, shit, shit.'

Somewhere, a backup battery activated, relighting the room softly. A few panels sprung to life under cracked glass, including the viewing monitor. Theo staggered over to the controls, trying to recode the power transfer again, but it was no good. The batteries were dead, and so was he.

Something caught his eye on the monitor. A notification that an asteroid had begun to enter the atmosphere, coming in much faster than usual. As it hurtled in, a second notification appeared under the monitor. Shuttle seventeen had left the surface. They were safe.

Theo would have cried, but he didn't have any tears left. He didn't have anything left. After two and a half centuries, he was entirely spent. The demise he had been longing for, the one he had also been avoiding, was now screaming towards him. A nightmare made real, deliberately.

Except, here and now, it didn't feel like a nightmare. It felt like simple inevitability. Above him, flying away to safety, was his own life. When that Theo grew up, he'd be here. He'd do the same thing. Then the next Theo would save the next, and so on, forever. Theo forever. He took a deep breath, enjoying the feel of air rushing into his lungs. He wiggled his fingers and toes, savouring the feeling of movement, before snatching up his bottle from the console and holding it aloft.

'Life,' Theo said, offering his final toast to his most complicated relationship. 'What a thing.'

Outside, the asteroid burst through the cloud layer, crashing into the ground below with an unparalleled explosion. Theo didn't need the monitor to watch the lightshow, as it was bright enough to be seen through the thick metal walls that surrounded him. The deafening crack of impact was followed by the thunderous roar of space being ripped apart, as a shockwave rippled the entire planet's surface. Behind it, explosions folded over explosions, rolling over the landscape, turning the surface layer into glass. By the time the fireball reached his little hut, Theo was already gone.

In orbit, a silence fell over a crowded shuttle as they came to terms with what they were seeing. In among all the gasps, a young Theo held

onto his teacher's sleeve, quietly and repeatedly asking if Lucas was OK.

Chapter Twenty

The Declaration

LUCAS | 2783

Eureka landed hard on the time machine floor, knocking the wind out of herself, along with a decent amount of swearing. She felt around, making sure she was home, her vision temporarily obscured by the afterimage of the final moments of Venus.

'Everyone alright?' she called out as she rubbed her eyes.

'That was close,' said Iscah, lying on the floor, breathing rapidly. 'Way too close.'

Kez stepped over Iscah, her attention already on the other person who was currently in the machine with them.

'Welcome back,' said Alphonse, emerging from nothing. 'Was the mission a success?'

Kez pushed past Alphonse, stopping in front of Theo. He was sitting upright, eyes a mix of excitement and fear, like a child who's just been told he has to fight a small clown.

'How did—' he squeaked, before Kez wrapped her arms around him, her two other team mates joining the hug moments later.

'Is that a yes?' Alphonse asked as his crew sobbed hysterically together.

With a grunt, Alphonse heaved open the door at the end of the walkway, allowing his exhausted crew access to the engineering floors of *Lucas*.

'Apologies for the hike,' he said for the fifteenth time that walk, holding the door open for the foursome. 'The matter couriers—'

'It's alright, Alphonse,' interrupted Iscah for the fourteenth time. 'We understand.'

'At least you've got the sound dampeners working again,' Kez said happily at the silence in the station, despite the gigantic blades spinning away around the corridor she had just exited. 'That time machine racket was doing my head in.'

The crew entered the lowest floor of *Lucas*, the engine room. Once

upon a time this room roared with life, keeping an old starship trekking across the cosmos. Now it kept the lights on and the water warm. It also looked like a bomb had gone off in it.

'Blimey,' said Eureka, tripping over a cable, the thick black haze in the room making it difficult to see. 'How bad was the bombardment?'

'We lost some minor systems. Nothing dreadful,' said Alphonse.

'You call this nothing dreadful?' Kez asked, waving her arms around at every textbook violation she could see through the smog.

'This room wasn't hit,' sighed Alphonse. 'Osheen wasn't a stickler for maintenance. We used to joke that he'd only notice there was a problem if he couldn't breathe. Even then …'

The group left the engine room and entered *Lucas* proper, with its carpeted floors and windowed corridors, outside of which Ipricus loomed, ever closer. They began to climb the stairs, aching muscles protesting with each step.

'You can head up to your room first if you'd like to freshen up,' said Alphonse as they passed the fifth floor, the smell of something violently awful seeping out slowly from under its locked door. 'Or we can debrief in the cafeteria first.'

'Cafeteria,' three of them said, simultaneously deciding that climbing just one more storey of stairs was superior to climbing three.

'OK, excellent,' said Alphonse. 'I've put a bit of a spread on for you. Hope that's alright.'

The aroma of Alphonse's cooking greeted the group's nostrils before the door to the cafeteria opened, revealing just how understated his last statement was. Twenty or thirty gastronorms sat on every surface of the room, including some of the chairs, each covered by a silver lid. Eureka walked over to one and opened it, revealing a deep brown vegetable stew, with hunks of carrots and dumplings the size of shot puts. Kez swiped a lid off and was greeted by an entire mountain of spaghetti and an avalanche of meatballs. Iscah discovered a broccoli and stilton soup, next to which sat several loaves of freshly baked bread, with crusts so crunchy you'd need the soup to be able to chew through them.

'I cook when I get stressed,' Alphonse shrugged as the group ran around the room, uncovering dish after dish.

'We weren't gone that long!' Kez exclaimed, finding a queso fundido topped with squash blossoms, and desperately searching for the requisite tortillas to go with it.

'I was *very* stressed,' Alphonse grinned sheepishly. Eventually, the

group found the meal of their choice, plated up, and sat together in one of the six-person booths.

'Not eating, Theo?' Alphonse asked, trying to work out what kind of dish Theo would go for. 'I think there's some tabbouleh over there. It might be a little too citrus-y, but it's still edible.'

'You haven't told me how I survived,' Theo said quietly. 'I feel a bit like the literal ghost at the feast.'

'You saved yourself,' said Iscah, blowing gently on her latest spoonful of soup. 'Or rather, you saved Gary, and he gave us the idea.'

'Gary survived!?' Theo exclaimed. 'I didn't even think …'

'Well, we only knew him for thirty seconds and got his life story,' said Kez. 'I'm assuming the passengers on the shuttle lynched him before they arrived at the station.'

'I don't recall any lynchings,' Theo smiled.

'He probably survived then,' Iscah said, going in for a dunk with another crust of bread.

'In among tales from his childhood, he did explain how you got him out of there, and it gave us an idea,' said Kez.

'Remember back in our first briefing?' Eureka asked, crunching into another heavily hoisined duck pancake. 'Osheen said that we could increase the range of the beacon, but it would take *a lot* of power.'

'I don't remember that at all,' muttered Theo.

'Me neither,' shrugged Eureka. 'Luckily for you, Iscah did.'

'A power pack the size of a building,' nodded Iscah. 'That's what Osheen said we needed.'

'And we didn't have one the size of a building,' continued Eureka, waving around a thin slice of spring onion. 'We had one the size of an *asteroid*.'

'Kez wired the beacon into the main grid,' said Iscah, watching a hunk of bread that had broken off sink into her soup. 'Then, she used the power from the asteroid as it came through the net. The beacon lit up like a star!'

'On that note,' said Eureka, pulling the beacon, or what was left of it, out of her pocket. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be,' said Alphonse as the charred beacon was slid across to him. He flipped it over, bits of it falling away as he did. 'Although, you *might* want to avoid Malcolm for a few days. He's got a lot on.'

'Well, he'll be disappointed to see this then,' exclaimed Iscah, as she revealed the time-travel fragments, complete with an intact memory card. 'Mission complete!'

‘Excellent work,’ Alphonse said, not sure if he should touch the debris or not. ‘Truly excellent.’

‘My lifelong nightmare ended up directly saving my life?’ Theo muttered, eyes still on his empty plate as he processed the revelation. ‘I can’t tell a therapist that. They’d explode.’

Theo stood, thousands of distinct emotions looking like they were about to burst from his body. ‘I’m going to go talk to Morag,’ he said softly. ‘Thank you all, so much.’

With a quick bow, Theo left the room.

‘Something we said?’ Kez asked.

‘Sounds like the poor lad has a lot to work out,’ said Alphonse. ‘Morag will see him right.’

The doors to the cafeteria slid open again, indicating the arrival of Malcolm, as well as several machine parts and tools that were bobbing along behind him. He took one look at the burned beacon, fizzed, and floated out again.

‘Malcolm!’ Alphonse yelled. ‘Over here, now. Captain’s orders!’

Malcolm grumpily floated back in, his shape giving everyone an idea of how he’d looked when he was a mopey teenager.

‘Ey up, cock,’ Eureka said in an awful attempt at an ancient accent. ‘Trouble at t’mill?’

‘One moment please,’ said Malcolm. ‘In addition to a multitude of station-wide damage that I must repair, I now seem to be having issues with my internal translator.’

‘I’ll interpret for you,’ said Alphonse. ‘She asked you if you were having any problems.’

Malcolm glared as much as a lightning bolt could, causing the hair on everyone’s arms to rise.

‘Many,’ he sighed. ‘Including the recent addition of a total reconstruction of a temporal beacon.’

‘You don’t think it’s repairable?’ Alphonse asked, indicating the pile of ash in front of him.

‘I am sorry,’ said Malcolm. ‘I have studied many sciences in my life, but never necromancy.’

The table oohed in unison, causing Alphonse to stand and step out of the booth.

‘Officer Malcolm,’ Captain Alphonse snapped. ‘Would you like to repeat that remark?’

Malcolm curled up a little.

‘No, sir.’

‘You should,’ Alphonse smiled. ‘It was funny. Now, can I get you something to eat? You look famished.’

‘Chinese?’ Eureka offered, pointing at the various gastronorms. ‘Italian? Mexican?’

‘Hydrocarbons,’ said Malcolm. ‘Methane preferably.’

‘Mexican then,’ Eureka giggled to herself, as Alphonse nodded and left for the kitchen.

‘Trouble with some field joints?’ Kez asked, watching various fasteners and O-rings bob around in Malcolm’s wake. ‘If you need any help—’

Kez’s vision immediately filled with a list of repair jobs that were currently being undertaken by Malcolm. Quickly, she flicked through, ticking a few that she knew she could handle without any problems.

‘Are you really willing to take twenty-four per cent of my workload?’ Malcolm asked hopefully.

‘Sure,’ Kez smiled. Half a second later various fasteners and O-rings crashed down onto the table in front of her, a clevis pin slowly sinking into her melted cheese.

‘Thank you,’ Malcolm said, visibly relieved.

‘Here you go, lad,’ Alphonse said as he returned. With a twist of bulky hands, he cracked open a vial, releasing a thick blue gas into the air. Malcolm swam through it, absorbing it into his body until not an atom remained.

‘Incredible flavour,’ said Malcolm. ‘Reminiscent of my homeworld. My compliments to your culinary abilities.’

Re-energised, he shot out of the room, the ruined beacon and time machine fragments flying off the table in pursuit.

‘Not a bad review,’ said Alphonse, unable to remove his grin. ‘Who needs a time machine when you can take people back with a good meal?’

‘How do you even begin to cook for a different species?’ Eureka asked, wondering if she could try some of the blue gas.

‘Cooking is just a bunch of learnable skills, whether it’s broiling, baking, or subatomic gastronomy,’ said Alphonse. ‘I’ve only just got the hang of tempering chocolate without falling foul of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. A right bugger that was.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Eureka, utterly unable to imagine.

‘Right then,’ said Alphonse, squeezing back into his seat. ‘The classic. If you had one meal left before you snuffed it, what would you order?’

‘Fried egg sandwich,’ Kez said, without hesitation. ‘When my Dad

and I were down in the generator, we'd clean the top of the heatsink and fry eggs on it. Nothing fancy, almost always burned, and if the generator overheated the whole station smelt like butter.'

'Beautiful,' said Alphonse. 'Eureka?'

'You'll love this,' she laughed. 'Sandwich cake.'

'You mean like a sponge with fruit filling?' asked Alphonse.

'No,' giggled Eureka. 'It's a cake, but instead of sweet layers, it's all savoury. Rye bread instead of sponge, cream cheese instead of icing, tomatoes, cucumber, smoked salmon, whatever you want really.'

'Ah,' said Alphonse, pointing a large, molten finger. '*Smörgåstårta*!'

'What's the story behind it?' Alphonse asked.

'Lily wanted to surprise me with a cake for my birthday when we first started dating. Trouble is, she was a dreadful cook and blindly followed the first recipe she found.'

'She didn't cotton on that it might not be what she was going for?' gasped Iscah.

'She said the slices of ham made her suspicious,' giggled Eureka. 'But no, she ploughed on regardless. Now it's a birthday tradition.'

'*Ribollita*,' said Iscah as the table turned to her. 'Most of the time we'd live off basic rations, these orange blocks of nutrients that tasted like eating a sponge, but every now and then it would be harvest time in the aeroponics lab. We'd all get together and create this massive bowl of soup, almost a cauldron, and there would be some bread to go with it. It really taught me the value of the simple things in life.'

'I don't think I've ever made a *ribollita*,' said Alphonse, casting his mind back and hoping for a bite. 'I'd love for you to teach me at some point.'

'If you've got cannellini beans and a whole bunch of veg then we're good to go,' Iscah said, before remembering a vital ingredient. 'We'll need stale bread too.'

'Well, we've got fresh bread and a time machine,' chuckled Alphonse. 'I can make that work.'

'Do you not feel like we've got enough meals in for the moment?' Kez asked, glancing around the well-stocked cafeteria.

'I had an absolute-zero freezer the size of a shipping container installed back there,' Alphonse said, jerking his skull at the kitchen behind him. 'Besides, everyone knows that meals taste better the next day anyway.'

'I'm game,' said Iscah. 'If we've got the time.'

'We've got until Malcolm fabricates a new beacon,' shrugged

Alphonse. ‘Eureka, Kez, you’re welcome to join us.’

‘No can do, Captain,’ Kez said, scooping up the components that lay around her. ‘Malcolm needs me in the engine room.’

‘Is Bea about yet?’ Eureka asked. ‘I wouldn’t mind a chat. See how she’s doing.’

Alphonse shook his head.

‘She’s finished purging Osheen’s body of that awful illness so, you know, we’d still have something to bury,’ he said quietly. ‘Now she’s asked for some space to grieve. Give her time.’

‘Then, I guess I’m just going to shower,’ Eureka said. ‘I don’t function properly unless I’m clean anyway.’

‘Fair enough,’ Alphonse smiled, a forked tongue poking out cheekily. ‘We didn’t want you in our *very* cool and *very* secret trans club anyway.’

Iscah chuckled and leaned over the table for a nice, snappy high five.

‘I never thought about aliens transitioning,’ said Eureka, willing to sacrifice shower time to learn something new.

‘It’s almost inevitable with us Besalt,’ Alphonse chuckled. ‘We’ve got over two hundred sexes and an unbelievable amount of genders. Half of the words in our language are just pronouns.’[fn55]

‘Sounds daunting,’ said Kez, arms laden with mechanical parts.

‘It’s a process,’ nodded Alphonse. ‘Eventually you find one that fits just right. For me, he/him. The bread and butter of gender.’

‘Speaking of,’ said Iscah, ‘we’ve got a soup to make.’

‘Right you are,’ Alphonse grinned. ‘Let’s make some food memories.’

With a handful of pleasantries the group parted ways, all of them having smuggled at least a little food from the table for later.

After several hours of talking, Morag reached the biggest, most difficult question on her digital clipboard. The one Theo didn’t want her to ask, yet knew she had to.

‘So,’ she asked from her chair, her robotic arms closest to the ground crossed. ‘How long would you say you’ve been experiencing suicidal thoughts for?’

She eyed Theo, who seemed smaller now. His form was hunched over, his eyes were avoiding hers. He was a different man than the one who stepped into the time machine a few hours ago. Closed then,

exposed now.

'There's a paradox in that doctor thing you swear by,' Theo said. 'The Hippocratic Oath?'

'The Declaration of Geneva,' Morag corrected. 'Which section are you referring to?'

'"The health and well-being of my patient will be my first consideration",' said Theo, saying the words he had memorised from many a plaque hung on many a hospital wall. '"Health" and "well-being" are two separate entities. How can they both be your first consideration?'

Morag didn't say anything. This wasn't a space in the conversation for her to fill.

'Health is always the first consideration,' Theo said, shaking his head. 'I get wheeled into the hospital room and nobody gives a damn about my well-being. They only care about my health. About keeping me going.'

Morag bit her tongues. *You're almost there*, she thought to herself as quietly as possible.

'I never asked to be put back together so many times,' Theo said, raising his voice slightly. 'To be snipped and sliced and stitched back into a person.'

He was on his feet now, fists balled tight.

'I don't recognise my own reflection anymore. How could I? These aren't even my eyes I'm seeing it with!'

Theo started to pace around the room, burning off energy in a way that wasn't anger.

'Do you think this is why you always seek out such dangerous jobs?' Morag asked.

'No,' Theo said, discarding the thought immediately. 'I just like animals.'

Morag glanced around the room theatrically.

'Can't see many animals,' she said.

'Look, if I take a job and it kills me, then that's my choice, alright?' Theo said, the pacing struggling to keep his anger from boiling over. 'My choice.'

'So, it's not death that appeals to you,' said Morag, her tone of voice steady. 'It's choice.'

Theo prepared to spit a retort, but it never came. His internal logic began to come apart at the seams, falling away, revealing a truth, glittering and new. He sat back down.

‘I never asked to be put back together so many times,’ he said again softly. ‘I never asked to live so long.’

‘You’ve had your autonomy stripped away without realising, leading you into a destructive spiral,’ Morag said, sitting forward, making sure he heard her. ‘You take a dangerous job, become injured, and end up back in hospital, changed against your will.’

‘Which means I take another dangerous job,’ Theo nodded slowly. ‘To reclaim that autonomy.’

‘I think so,’ said Morag.

Theo took both a breath and a moment to contemplate this.

‘Some days,’ he said, ‘I despise what medicine has done to me.’

‘That’s a fair response,’ replied Morag, making a note.

‘It’s why I left you.’

Theo’s words hovered between the two of them, seemingly forever. Eventually, Morag placed her clipboard onto the arm of her chair.

‘You never told me that,’ she said.

‘I don’t think I knew back then,’ Theo replied, trying his darndest to maintain eye contact. ‘So I just left.’

Morag shook her head in disbelief.

‘It took you two and a half centuries, but you’ve finally learned how to open up,’ she grinned.

‘Too little, too late,’ Theo said sadly. ‘How many times have we run into each other since, and I never even said I was—’

‘I think it’s best we save this discussion for a later day,’ Morag interrupted, her sheer professionalism overriding her need to have this conversation. ‘Conflict of interest on my part.’

‘OK,’ nodded Theo. ‘Good shout.’

‘Let’s wrap up on a productive note,’ Morag said, grabbing her clipboard. ‘Long term, I’d like you to begin therapy with an old colleague of mine, Dr Barton, over on Tethys. Lovely chap, and a real specialist in these sorts of matters.’

Theo nodded, already having forgotten the name, but knowing that he’d receive one of Morag’s trademark writeups after this.

‘Additionally,’ she continued. ‘When all of this is over, I’d like to sit down with you and add some notes to your medical records. Primarily, a list of medical interventions that you would be comfortable with in the event of an emergency procedure.’

‘Oh,’ said Theo, slightly taken aback at the option. ‘I’d really like that.’

‘Excellent,’ smiled Morag, standing and escorting Theo to the door.

‘Now, go and clean yourself up. I’m going to have to sweep half of Venus out of here after you’re gone.’

Theo took a whiff of his uniform, pretended to gag, then nearly did when the stench made it to his olfactory system. He made it to the door before turning back to Morag, desperate to use his newfound skill in opening up.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘For how I acted, for how I treated you, for making my issues yours. I’m just sorry.’

A glance between the two of them held for a little too long. A glance made extra painful by the knowledge of just how close the nearest time machine was to the pair of them.

‘I know, and I forgive you,’ Morag smiled. ‘Besides, the engagement ring paid for my degree. I call that even.’

‘Yeah,’ said Theo sheepishly. ‘But if it wasn’t for me you wouldn’t have had to rebuild your whole life.’

‘I’m where I’m supposed to be,’ Morag said warmly.

Theo nodded, went to apologise again, thought better of it, and left. Moments later, he returned.

‘Hang on,’ he said. ‘What university charges for its courses?’

‘Courses?’ laughed Morag. ‘I meant it paid for the exam answers.’

‘Well, that explains everything,’ Theo chuckled, turning back to the door. Before it slid open, he caught sight of his own reflection in it and, for the first time in a long time, recognised the man looking back at him.

Looking yourself up online is never a good idea. At best, you’ll find nothing and have to realise that nobody cares about you. At worse, you’ll find out that people do care about you and are in the process of building some sort of cult about it. You can never win.

Eureka Shine knew that under no circumstances should she look herself up. As the only person to travel forwards in time, she’d only ever find herself in the past tense. Achievements achieved. Legacy locked. No mental good could come of this, and she was more than aware of that.

Still, after a few minutes of idly reading facts about the Fibril Blue, she did become tempted. Sure, it was fascinating that they could force themselves back to life after death, but a deep, dark, and quite loud part of herself didn’t care about anyone else right now. What was

everyone saying about *her*?

One, she promised herself. *I'll just read one thing about myself, then I'll stop.*

Hours later, several books, artworks and a fair few dramatized biopics about herself in her search history, Eureka discovered a video she simply had to watch. Hearing what history thinks about you is one thing, but watching the video they use to teach children about you is quite another.

With a tap of her EC, the dorm room slowly transformed into the deck of the *Paracosm*, causing a knotted, twisting feeling to tighten inside of her. It was perfect, down to every last detail. The only slight difference was that the crew was all being played by actors, and the only massive difference was that they suddenly all started to sing.

Welcome to the Paracosm*,*
The future of the human race.
We'll be the first to travel,
Into the depths of space!

Eureka blinked, taken aback by the visual of her dead crew singing a jaunty number at her. This compounded when the actor playing her entered the set at speed, leapt onto the command table, and continued the merry jaunt.

I'm Eureka Shine,
I'm as brave as can be.
I'll captain this ship,
Out into the starry sea!

A second actor joined the Eureka character on the table, this one wearing an oversized red curly wig. As she stood, a hush fell over the rest of the crew.

I'm Lily Shine,
So be quiet all you nerds.
I'm the second-in-command,
And love saying swear words!

Eureka sighed as the admittedly pretty accurate Lily started to point at people and say bleeped-out swear words. *I told her those fucks would end up in the history books,* she muttered.

Now it's time to launch,
Let's start the interstellar drive!
Although we do not know it yet,
Only some of us will survive.

'What did she say?' asked the actor playing Passmore, in a comedy moment that would have landed better had the entire audience of one not been through this disaster only a few days ago.

Suddenly the set wobbled, lights flashed, and the virtual ship was off. The cast celebrated in a highly choreographed manner, until big red signs reading 'uh oh' appeared on all of the monitors. Everyone panicked and ran about screaming until the lights dimmed, the cast froze, and a spotlight fell onto the actor playing Eureka as the noise echoed away.

We're off to explore the stars,
On board the Paracosm.
But on this tragic day.
The first to die woz 'im.

With that, she pointed to Passmore, who suddenly exploded into light with a bang. Eureka yelped and pulled the EC from her head, returning her to her silent bunk room. After a time, she lay back onto her mattress, legs still dangling off the edge, heart still racing. In her head, the final moments of Passmore repeated, both the real, and the fictional, over and over again, no matter how hard she tried to make them stop.

Kez was in her element, which is to say that she was entirely inside a wall with a torch strapped to her head.

'Come on, you bugger,' she muttered through the screwdriver sticking out both sides of her mouth.

With a click, the wire she was holding at the end of a stretched arm slotted into place.

'Gottcha.'

Kez released the pressure from her right knee, pulled it further under herself, and applied the pressure again. She then slid her left knee up the wall opposite, pressing hard on her right knee for support, bringing her closer to the fiddly circuit above. Her right hand swiped the

screwdriver out of her mouth and, with a few twists, locked the wire into place.

'TRY IT NOW!' she yelled. On the other side of the wall, Malcolm flicked a switch, rerouting the station's processing power through Kez's fix. To his surprise, nothing exploded.

Kez dropped to the ground and leaned out of the panel she'd removed earlier.

'I told you!' she beamed into the engineering bay. 'This circuit can easily take the capacitance of the whole CPU array.'

'The manual states a much lower tolerance,' said Malcolm, entering the wall to examine Kez's work as she swung herself out. 'I do not understand how you have accomplished this.'

'Manuals are written by dreamers,' chuckled Kez. 'Perfect conditions and new components. After a station has been in space a week you might as well throw the whole thing out and write your own.'

'Such a natural aptitude,' Malcolm said as he floated back out of the panel. 'May I ask why you did not pursue this as a line of work?'

'I would have loved to,' sighed Kez. 'Just had other things to worry about first.'

'A pity,' said Malcolm as he floated the panel back into place, the screws spinning gracefully into their slots. 'If you will excuse me, I can now return to synthetising a new beacon.'

'You're excused,' Kez said, watching Malcolm shoot out of the room, excited to play around with all the new processing power Kez had just freed up.

I leave you alone for five minutes and you're making nerd friends, scoffed E-NA, reinstalling herself. *How the mighty have fallen.*

'Leave him alone,' said Kez, pulling a wrench out of a toolbox, ready for the next job. 'He's lovely.'

Sorry, replied E-NA in a tone just approaching the sarcasm line but not quite stepping over it. *I didn't know you fancied him.*

Kez bit her mind's tongue, instead deciding to focus on the job at hand. She pulled a large red handle on the wall, temporarily cutting the water supply of the ship off.

Oh, lovely. Leave me abandoned on a hard disk for hours and then ignore me, E-NA said, now well over the sarcasm line.

'I'm a little busy right now,' Kez said, watching as the water pressure gauge on the pipe in front of her began to drop slowly. 'The station's clean water supply is running low and I think it's due to a filtration shutter in here that might have fused half closed.'

Nice to see they're not overworking you, said E-NA. *'Kez, save the galaxy for us. Also, would you mind awfully having a look at the plumbing. There's a good chap.'*

'Maybe I wanted to help,' Kez muttered. 'Maybe fixing, repairing, and maintaining is something that makes me happy.'

I don't remember your happiness being part of our plan, E-NA scoffed.

Kez's wrench hit the pipe in anger, sending a loud clang reverberating through all seven of *Lucas*'s floors.

'Not part of the plan?' Kez spat. 'The plan that involves me doing all the work, me making all the sacrifices, and me putting my life in danger? That plan? Compats can climb ranks. They can reach as high as any human. Why aren't you out there, finding Mum?'

Because—

'Because you're a coward,' said Kez, manipulating the compression fitting effortlessly. 'You kept telling me to push myself, to improve. Now, here I am, doing just that. And what do you do? You abandon me the instant anything turns dangerous.'

That's not true, E-NA replied, clearly hurt. It didn't stop Kez.

'When I fell out of this ship, what did you do? Teleport me back? Seek help? No. You hid and left me to die. It's no wonder you came back and Mum didn't.'

Kez yanked the section of pipe away, throwing it to one side a little harder than necessary.

How dare you, whispered E-NA.

'You know what?' Kez sighed, just wanting the conversation to be over. 'Just fuck off back to your hard drive. I'll mail you home when this is over.'

E-NA never replied. She was gone before Kez had finished talking. Kez shook her head and got back to work. With a series of twists, she removed the culprit from the pipe and smiled at it. A filtration shutter that had somehow fused half closed.

'Come in,' Bea murmured as a series of melodic chimes indicated the presence of someone at the door to Osheen's office.

'Hey,' said Eureka as she entered, barely able to see in the low light. On the centre of Osheen's desk, Bea sat, tilted slightly to one side. 'Just wanted to check in,' Eureka continued, 'but I can go if you'd prefer to

be alone.'

'I actually wouldn't mind the company,' Bea said softly, continuing to watch the rain outside. 'Bit lonely.'

Eureka drew a chair up to the desk, sitting down and offering her kindest smile. Suddenly, a pipe that ran up the side of the room clanged loudly. Bea rolled over to look at the pipe, sighed, then rolled back.

'They've been making that sound for three hours now,' she said.

'Kez is doing some maintenance,' Eureka nodded. 'It started with changing a filter, now the majority of the plumbing on board is in pieces.'

'Oh, that's good,' Bea muttered, her energy clearly low. 'This place was falling apart under Osheen.'

'I think he was just focused on the bigger picture,' shrugged Eureka.

'No,' said Bea. 'He just never cared about people.'

Eureka thought to argue, but she didn't exactly have positive personal experience to draw from. She'd seen Osheen as a complicated wooden puzzle. Clever, but every now and then you just want to smash the frustrating bastard into pieces.

'When I heard he had died, the first thing I felt was sadness,' she said. 'The second was relief.'

'May I ask why?' queried Bea.

'I thought he'd never send me home,' Eureka shrugged. 'Not maliciously. I just assumed he'd forget about me.'

Bea laughed bitterly.

'Yeah,' she said. 'That was Osheen alright. He wanted to save everyone, without caring about anyone. Now he's downstairs in a cold drawer and nobody cares. It serves him right.'

The two of them watched the rain tap against the window for a moment, the droplets running down the pane, growing as they collided with their peers.

'Haven't seen it rain for a while,' said Eureka. 'I always found the sound of it comforting.'

Bea rolled over slowly, gazing out at the rainfall. 'Back when I first moved into this shell, Osheen used to hide me under his coat when it rained. I'm completely waterproof. I can't even feel water, but every time he'd protect me.'

'That's adorable,' smiled Eureka.

'I used to think so too,' said Bea. 'Now, I'm pretty sure he was just protecting his work.'

Silence fell again as the downpour continued. Eureka wondered when the last time she'd seen rain was. It must have been half a year ago at least.

Too many months on ships and stations, she thought to herself. *When I get home I'll …*

Hang on.

'Why the ever-loving fuck is it raining in space?!' Eureka exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. 'Is this a future thing?'

Bea's low battery meant it took her a moment to process this. She swivelled from Eureka to the window and back several times.

'I haven't a clue,' she said. 'Could it be that—'

Another big clang on the pipes. Slowly, the rain stopped, with the remaining water on the windows slowly vaporising into the vacuum of space.

'Kez,' said Eureka, tapping herself on the forehead in an acceptance of her own stupidity. 'She must have vented some excess water.'

'Which is why it didn't evaporate,' Bea said, rolling face down in shame. 'The water on board is treated to survive absolute zero for a short while. That way leakages in external pipes don't cause your whole supply to boil away in an instant.'

'I didn't even notice!' laughed Eureka. 'I was just like, "this is lovely".'

'I was starting to think that it was a sign,' Bea chuckled. 'We're idiots, Eureka. Absolute morons.'

'Nobody can know about this. It'll end our careers.'

'It never leaves the room,' giggled Bea. 'Affinity cadets honour.'

A spark of static filled the air, before a sputtering roar indicated a giant clearing its throat.

'Attention,' boomed Alphonse's voice over the speaker system, his words underlined with a hint of feedback. 'We are ready for the next mission to commence. Would all time travellers please suit up and head to the briefing … uhhh … cafeteria. Thank you.'

'That's my cue,' Eureka said, standing up and returning the chair to its original position. 'If there's anything I can get you …'

'Was I an idiot for caring about him?' Bea asked quietly.

'Maybe,' said Eureka, scootching next to her on the desk. 'I didn't know him all that well, but I do know how much good he put into this universe. Without you, he never would have made it this far.'

Bea let this concept percolate through her logic programming for a while. Errors returned, but fewer than before.

‘Thanks, Eureka,’ she said, rolling over and bumping off her thigh. ‘I think it’s time for me to get back to work.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Eureka. ‘Have a good recharge, then come meet up with us after this mission. Everyone will be so happy to see you.’

With that, Eureka hopped off the desk, patted Bea on the head, and went to leave.

‘Eureka,’ Bea said, causing her to turn. ‘More than anything, he loved his work. Don’t let him down.’

‘No chance,’ Eureka grinned as she left the room, ready to face down her own destiny.

Chapter Twenty-One

Stomping Grounds

LUCAS | 2783

‘Tuesday, June 11, 2154,’ said Alphonse. ‘The Moon. Collins University.’

‘My turn,’ nodded Eureka.

‘Good day was it?’ asked Theo. ‘No deep-seated childhood trauma you’re revisiting?’

‘No idea,’ shrugged Eureka. ‘Sounds like a normal Tuesday to me.’

‘It’s anything but, I’m afraid,’ said Alphonse. ‘We’ve checked through Affinity records and discovered timetables for the day. Eureka here was taking, and may I add, passing, a vitally important flight exam.’

‘Oh!’ Eureka yelled, slapping her hands down onto the table. ‘I know the day you’re on about!’

Eureka glanced around the room, beaming. Then, as quickly as it arose, her enthusiasm retreated, a blush flashing across her face.

‘This will be your last search-and-recovery mission,’ continued Alphonse, leaving that moment be. ‘Find the final piece of the time machine and return it to *Lucas*. As this is a vitally important day in the history of our history, discretion isn’t advised, it is demanded.’

The team nodded in unison.

‘One final point of note,’ said Alphonse, holding aloft a shining new piece of tech. ‘Malcolm has fabricated a new beacon for you to use on this trip. However, he advises me that, due to the speed in which it was constructed, it may be unstable. Do not, under any circumstances, split up.’

The team gulped in unison.

‘KEZIA,’ boomed the unthinkable thing in the void as Kez passed through again.

‘Yes?’

‘STAY,’ whispered the second thing, shaking Kez to her core.

‘Stay?’ Kez asked. ‘I can’t, can I?’

‘YOU WILL,’ said the first, as Kez felt the now all-too-familiar pull of

time, sending her to a place where that feeling was a complete unknown to her.

THE MOON | 2154

The time-travelling team cracked into existence in a small, dead-end alley. Three colossal red-brick walls bracketed them, as well as a series of waste storage bins which emanated fumes so strong they threatened to wipe everyone's eyebrows from their face.

'That smell takes me back,' said Eureka, tapping her disguise and taking the form of a dorky-looking ginger boy, complete with jeans, a white shirt, and a pocket protector. 'The remnants of a party.'

Kez raised a sturdy eyebrow and lowered it the instant she realised that it pulled her nostril slightly more open.

'It smells like someone died back here,' she said, noticing that her fringe was now neon blue. 'Several people maybe.'

'This doesn't take you back?' asked Eureka. 'Alcohol, girls, and deadlines all vying for your attention?'

'Take me back where?' Kez replied. 'I only graduated a few days ago.'

'Oh yeah,' said Eureka, slightly disappointed. 'Theo, Iscah, any wild uni stories to share?'

'Never went,' said Iscah. 'Hyperplanet.'

'Went,' said Theo. 'It was over two hundred years ago. Forgotten all of it.'

Eureka sighed at the sheer un-coolness of her group and got back to work. With a nod she indicated a wooden gate and the end of the alley, and the four time travellers headed there.

'You do know that alcohol and parties aren't really a thing at universities anymore, right?' Kez said as they shoved a dumpster into place to aid the climb. 'We go for the education. To better ourselves.'

'Really?' said Eureka, even more disappointed. 'No getting shitfaced, throwing up on a stranger's intimate areas, and having a toke on the devil's lettuce before cramming for an exam in the morning that you take with two hours' sleep and a few thousand milligrams of caffeine in your system?'

Kez stared blankly for a moment, trying to parse that sentence and who it was coming from. This was like seeing Marie Antoinette in tatty pyjamas, or Einstein on the toilet.

‘Nope,’ she eventually replied, scrambling up the metal bin behind Eureka. ‘Just classes, extra-curricular activities, and exams at the end.’

‘Oh, you haven’t lived!’ Eureka said as she disappeared over the gate.

‘I’m surprised you’re still alive,’ Kez muttered as she followed, landing in the most stunning campus she’d ever seen. Greenery shot in every direction, scattered with colossal orange trees, rough stone statues, and a thick river riding through the middle. Paths criss-crossed in every direction as students began their day. Some bright and peppy, others slow and regretful. ‘It’s beautiful,’ Kez said, as the scent of lemons drifted through the air from somewhere she couldn’t pinpoint. ‘Absolutely stunning.’

Around this central area, tall red-brick buildings stood, covered with ivy and peppered with thin, arched windows. Directly in front of them, up a large amount of stairs, lived a gloriously old building which could literally only be a library or a museum. Anything else would be a crime against its lofty spires.

‘Where did you study again?’ Eureka asked with a cheeky grin.

‘The Homeship *Xiphosura*,’ replied Kez.

‘Anything like this?’

‘Our mascot was a crab,’ sighed Kez. The beacon beeped, indicating that it had discovered the location of their target.

‘Huh …’ Theo said, staring at the readout screen which was somehow now even smaller. ‘The rift already formed.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Eureka. ‘When?’

‘Five minutes ago,’ Theo replied, pointing directly up. ‘And about forty miles that way.’

The group looked up. Above them, ships of all shapes and sizes were passing by. Some in orbit, others coming in for a landing, and a few poor sods taking flight exams. Suddenly, the beacon drew everyone’s attention back to the ground. For ten seconds, it held a single, low tone as a red light flashed rapidly on its casing.

‘What does that mean?’ Iscah asked, before being given an answer. Soundlessly, she vanished.

‘Shit!’ yelled Kez, looking around the campus to see if anyone spotted the woman vanishing into nothing. ‘Where did she go?’

‘Emergency dump,’ Theo read from the device, causing both Kez and Eureka to supress a little, inappropriate giggle. ‘It looks like the beacon’s power supply didn’t have enough juice to support all of us, so it sent her home.’

‘So, it’s just the three of us?’ Kez asked, happy that the light was at least yellow now.

‘Looks that way,’ nodded Theo. ‘We should move.’

‘Where?’ Kez asked before being cut off by a starship screaming overhead, wobbling dopily as it came in for a rough landing somewhere behind the library.

‘Terrible aileron stability,’ Eureka tutted. ‘He’s not reconfigured it for atmospheric thickness.’

In the distance, a dull thud signified that someone wasn’t getting a good grade this morning. ‘Rough,’ she winced, turning back to Kez and Theo, one of whom was no longer standing there.

‘Oh shit,’ muttered Kez, jumping at the lack of her crewmate as Eureka scooped the beacon from the floor, its light now green.

‘Still with me?’ Eureka asked, taking a lead that she was certainly not going to be contested for.

‘Looks like it,’ Kez gulped.

‘Let’s get going then,’ Eureka said, jogging off and leaving Kez alone and mostly confused.

‘I thought you said it was in the sky?’ she yelled across the campus, pointing up just in case.

‘It was,’ said Eureka, waving the beacon. ‘But according to this, it just crashed into landing pad two!’

Iscah and Theo landed on the time machine’s floor in a heap, their hair staticky as all hell.

‘Uh oh,’ Theo said, sitting up.

‘Uh oh,’ said Iscah, sitting up next to him.

‘Uh oh,’ said Alphonse, scrambling off a chair in the command centre, pretending he wasn’t just getting ready to have a nap.

Lily Faulperk checked her watch for the third time in as many femtoseconds, her stomach twisting into an anxious pretzel as she watched the second hand tick on mercilessly.

Where the fuck is Eureka, she thought angrily as she stomped around. *She’s beyond lucky that they’re running late.*

The doors to the common room burst open, earning a shush from the nervous student in the corner frantically cramming for their test later

that day.

'Bollocks!' yelled Brandon as he started ripping off his flight suit. 'Absolute bollocks.'

'What happened?' Lily asked, as the shusher shushed again.

'What happened? WHAT HAPPENED?!' yelled Brandon. '"Brandon Coulter: F Grade" is what fucking happened.'

The shusher sighed, packed up his things, and went to the library instead. At least it would be quiet in the library.

'You failed?' Lily asked, genuine disbelief on her face. 'How?'

'No idea! Fucking thing went kaput mid-flight didn't it!' Brandon said, throwing his suit into the bin and sulking on the closest chair. 'Big bang, lots of smoke, and suddenly that modern piece of shit flew about as well as a factory.'

'Shit,' said Lily, sitting down next to him. 'How's Robbie taking it?'

'Onions?' Brandon replied. 'Onions ejected!'

'No!' squealed Lily in surprise, despite ejecting mid-exam being a very Robbie Onions thing to do. 'What are you going to do now?'

'I'm going to call my ma, then I'm going to complain to anyone who will listen in the hope that they give me drinks.'

'Good plan,' Lily nodded. 'I'll meet you in the bar after our flight.'

'You flying with Eureka today?' he asked.

'Yep,' Lily said shortly, checking her watch again.

'Well,' Brandon said, getting to his feet. 'She might be late, but she'll not bail on you.'

'She's no Robbie Onions,' said Lily with a smile and that odd feeling again. What *was* that?

With a wave goodbye and a kick of the bin, Brandon walked towards the door.

'Maybe this is a good thing,' he said, one hand on the door handle. 'I never really liked piloting. I might go do something else.'

'Engineering?' Lily giggled. 'If you're not cut out to be the face of a ship, why not be the bowels?'

'I can go off you, you know,' Brandon chuckled as he left, almost colliding with the balding man coming the other way.

'Ms Faulperk,' Professor Pri said as he slid past Brandon. 'We're ready for you and Ms Shine now.'

'Right,' said Lily. 'I don't quite know where she is but—'

Professor Pri shed a single, very visible grey hair. Both he and Lily watched it fall to the ground and land silently on the carpet below. 'Ms Faulperk, I have recently survived a shuttle crash, so I will be blunt. If

you are not on the landing pad in fifteen minutes with Ms Shine in tow, then you will both be failing my class, and thus, the entire year. Do we understand each other?'

'Aye,' nodded Lily, her eye twitching. 'That we do.'

'You do this often then?' Kez asked as Eureka revealed a hole in the security fencing around the landing pads. 'Breaking and entering?'

'I'm entering, but there's no breaking involved,' said Eureka, shimmying through the gap. 'Well, not after the first time anyway.'

'I never knew you were such a tearaway,' Kez said, following Eureka through the gap. 'The history books painted you as a sort of … stoic hero.'

'Hey,' said Eureka, 'I am a stoic hero! Just one who used to joyride a lot in university ships.'

'How did you ever make captain?' Kez asked, following Eureka as they crouch-walked towards the pads, her thighs on absolute fucking fire.

'I dunno,' shrugged Eureka. 'Illicit flight hours are still flight hours.'

Two safety personnel in blue overalls ran past, both wielding fire extinguishers in each hand. 'We'll wait here for a bit,' Eureka said, taking cover behind a bush. 'Let the coast clear.'

'Good thinking,' said Kez. 'I guess that ugly burning one is our target.'

'It is ugly, isn't it?' Eureka said, admiring Kez's taste in ship design. 'You ever flown a starship?'

'Not in an atmosphere,' said Kez. 'I don't like the idea of malfunctions too close to a stellar body. The thought of falling towards a planet, knowing there's nothing I could do to stop it. Bleh.'

'Funny isn't it,' Eureka chuckled. 'We're fine with dying of old age, or instant explosive death, but knowing you're going to die for a few minutes before it happens really gets our dander up. We draw odd lines.'

'That's funny to you?' asked Kez quietly.

'Now!' exclaimed Eureka, nipping out from behind the foliage and heading towards the smouldering ship. Kez followed, pretending like she was supposed to be here. Lots of looking at things and nodding, a clipboard or hard hat away from the perfect disguise.

'Look busy and stay quiet,' Eureka said as they marched up to the

ship a little too fast. ‘We’ll be in and out in no time.’

As they approached, Eureka clocked a toolbox on the floor and, without breaking stride, nicked a screwdriver from one of the topmost sections. ‘See, the thing about the Kobu X-44 Legacy Class is that it has dreadful thermal shield adhesion on the underbelly,’ Eureka said as they arrived at the ship. ‘An impact between the plating can tear it off with ease.’

To demonstrate this, Eureka wedged the screwdriver between two of the white plates that made up the bottom of the ship. With a shifty glance behind her and an unnecessary cough, she uppercut the handle of the screwdriver, causing a large panel to fall off and dangle in the air, thick cables still connecting it to the ship like an electrical umbilical cord.

‘See?’ she said, as she climbed up into the innards of the ship. ‘Trash.’

Kez followed, scampering up a small yellow ladder, a tiny bit in love. After a brief climb, she found herself inside a cupboard-sized cylinder, soft blue lighting reflecting from several exceptionally shiny panels.

‘Welcome to maintenance,’ Eureka said, taking care not to fall back down the hole they’d just climbed through, tentatively stepping on the thin walkway as she scanned with the beacon.

‘Maintenance?’ Kez exclaimed, looking around a room that had been designed by someone who seriously loathed engineers. ‘This place?!’

Every blindingly shiny panel appeared to be welded to the walls, the majority of the exposed cables were fused into secure brackets, and an unknown blue goo blobbed around inside perfectly mounted, transparent canisters.

‘I don’t understand,’ Kez said, tapping one of the canisters of goo, its surface ice cold to the touch. ‘How do you fix anything?’

‘You don’t,’ sighed Eureka. ‘The idea was to make everything easier. Something breaks, you just swap it out. Simple.’

Kez tugged on a panel; it didn’t budge. ‘So what do you swap out if whatever is behind here breaks?’ she asked.

‘The entire maintenance section,’ Eureka replied as the beacon pinged the fragment’s location. She touched the wall in front of her and immediately withdrew her hand.

‘Hot,’ she muttered, before fruitlessly attacking the wall with a screwdriver.

‘Eureka?’ Kez asked.

‘Uh huh …’ she groaned, attempting to leverage the screwdriver with one foot on the opposite wall.

‘This is probably a condensed nitrogen line,’ Kez said, indicating one of the pipes on the wall. ‘If we pull some electricity, I can fashion a rudimentary plasma cutter in like, five minutes.’

Eureka froze, mid stab, and looked between the pipe Kez had pointed out and the panel she’d barely scratched.

‘Good idea, Number One,’ she smiled, stepping out of the way, colliding with a suspended canister of goo, and falling down the hole.

‘You alright?’ Kez asked as she knelt, her voice echoing out of the ship.

‘Nothing hurt but my ego,’ whimpered Eureka, getting to her feet. ‘Also, my spine. And this leg. And honestly my neck hasn’t—’

A loud hissing drew Kez’s attention back into the room. The canister that Eureka had collided with had cracked and was now spraying high-pressure goo all over the panels opposite Kez. A few moments later, it began to melt them.

‘Well, that was easier than a plasma cutter,’ Eureka’s head beamed, poking out of the floor. ‘Job done.’

Kez frowned.

‘You said that panel was hot,’ she muttered. ‘Everything else in here is supercooled, so wouldn’t that mean—’

The goo penetrated the panel, causing an oxygen-hungry fire to explode out from it, blowing the panel away and into the wall just above Kez’s head. The confined space suddenly filled with intense heat and a thick black smoke, causing Eureka and Kez to scramble out, back into the breathable lunar air.

‘Shit,’ said Eureka, wiping dark soot from a face that wasn’t hers. ‘That’s not good.’

The smoke began to pour out of the base of the ship like it was unsure who the next pope was going to be.

‘So, we’re looking for a piece of a machine, in a machine that’s in pieces, and now we won’t even be able to see?’ coughed Kez. ‘That about sum this up?’

With a sigh of anger at herself, Eureka climbed back into the ship. Moments later she emerged, coughing up a lung.

‘Yeah, I’ve fucked that,’ she said, spitting black phlegm onto the floor. ‘Any ideas?’

‘Turn on the air recycling,’ said Kez, watching the dark mist swirl away into the sky. ‘Flush out the smoke.’

‘We’ll need the key to the ship,’ said Eureka. ‘Normally it would just be a launch code, but recently they started cracking down on people flying outside of lesson time.’

‘I wonder why that was …’ Kez muttered.

‘The keys only work at a certain time, for a certain genetic code,’ said Eureka. ‘For this to work we’d need to find out which student had the key, what time their test was, *and* have a copy of their genetic code. The chances of us obtaining all of that in the twenty minutes we have left is one in …’

Eureka caught herself. Grinned.

‘One.’

With that she turned and sprinted back to the hole in the fence.

‘Where are you going?!’ Kez called, running after her.

‘Where do you think?’ Eureka replied, a little too excited. ‘I’m going to go mug myself!’

Sweat poured down Tibby’s brow as fire licked at the side of her wok. Her heart raced as she stirred the far-too-wet rice with the wooden spoon. She’d ruined it. Years of work, months of preparation, and she’d ruined the risotto. Of course she had. It was a risotto, a dish that even world-renowned chefs had trouble getting right every time. Risotto is like life. Sometimes, it just all goes to shit for no reason whatsoever.

She glanced up at the clock. Two minutes. Not enough time to start again. Not enough time to save it. Quickly, she diced some more chorizo, hoping that the artificial meat would somehow absorb a little of the moisture that threatened to turn her dish into rice pudding. In it went. Round it spun. She tasted it. Too salty now. She would have cried, but that would have messed the salt levels up even more.

Tibby needed a miracle. A hero. That or the examiner to have a massive heart attack. She was fine with either. Her life hinged on this moment. The timer beeped. The exam was over. She decided to go for the tears now, but they evaporated in the heat of the kitchen before they hit the ground. The examiner drew near, tasting the dishes of her peers as she walked around. A spoon went in, a grade came out. One mouthful, one careful chew, a swallow, and a result. She approached Tibby now, moving almost in slow motion. A new spoon emerged and down it went, deep, deep into the dish.

As the spoon neared the examiner’s mouth, wide and ready to judge,

the door behind her burst open, catapulting her and her spoon face first into the plate, shattering it, obliterating the meal, and breaking the examiner's nose.

'I am *so* sorry,' said the ginger kid who had just burst in, a splodge of risotto on his pocket protector. He whipped his head around, saw what he was looking for, and grabbed Tibby's knife.

'Mind if I borrow this?' he said, before giving a cheeky grin and leaving through the back entrance, a blue-haired punk hot on his tail. As the door swung closed, then open, then closed again, a silence fell on the kitchen. Tibby was ecstatic. She would sure as hell get a re-do now.

Tibby was wrong, however. The examiner rose back up, like a vampire who had just had their face smashed into a bowl of risotto. With a deft motion, she scooped up some of the rice that wasn't covered in her own blood, and tasted it, extracting a small gasp from the room as she did. She chewed, swallowed and, as her clotting nose diminished her sense of smell, she missed the deep saltiness. Tibby passed her course and, although she didn't know it at the time, became the first person in the universe to call Eureka Shine a hero.

Eureka skipped up the stone staircase to the library, the stubby knife hidden, pressed under her arm. 'We'll have to wait,' she said, doing her best to mask how out of breath she was. 'We can't get inside without an ID card.'

'Why?' asked Kez, panting as she made it to the top. 'They worried we're going to steal knowledge and take it for a joyride?'

'This library is full of one-of-a-kind artefacts and books,' Eureka said, glancing up at its stunning façade. 'So, actually, yeah. That's exactly what they're worried about. The doors are locked, phones don't work in there, and I'm pretty sure the rumours of actual book worms that eat students that misbehave aren't just rumours.'

Kez plopped down onto the top step. Eureka joined her.

'So, what's the plan?' Kez asked. 'I really hope it's not what I think it is.'

'Oh, it is,' smiled Eureka. 'Younger me is in that library right now. Once Lily is done telling me off, we'll run right past here, starship keys in my bag.'

'This is the point where you tell me that you were accosted by a

nerd and a punk just before your exam, right?' said Kez. 'Otherwise, I can see a flaw in your plan.'

'Nah,' Eureka said, checking the time and scrambling back to her feet. 'But my bag split open as I left the library. Huge rip down the side. I thought I caught it on something while rushing.'

'I guess you did,' said Kez, taking two attempts to stand. 'A knife wielded by your future self.'

'Bad day for Occam's Razor,' said Eureka.

For a time, the two of them watched the entrance in silence. Kez, tapping her foot slightly, Eureka rubbing her thumb down the blade of the knife.

'This is risky,' said Kez. 'Even for us, this is risky. One slip up and you could injure yourself, even kill yourself. Either of you. Both of you!'

'It'll be fine,' said Eureka. 'It has been so far.'

'Has it?' Kez asked, a little too loud. 'I've been thrown around time like a ragdoll, shot at, almost suffocated in both water *and* space, and blown up more times than I can imagine. Which part of that would you say has been "fine"?!'

Eureka drew breath to reply, but someone stole it as they shoulder-barged between the two of them. Red-haired, sharp-faced and utterly, utterly fuming, this woman carried on walking, shoving the glass door to the library open with both hands, and vanishing into the dusty darkness within.

'Prick,' muttered Kez. 'Some people, eh?'

Eureka turned to Kez, the eyes of her disguise tinged with red around the edges.

'Hey now,' she croaked. 'That's my wife you're talking about.'

'Professor Pri is furious,' said Lily as she came crashing back out of the library, a young Eureka in tow. 'We only have limited flight time.'

Kez held her breath as Eureka stepped out of her own way, apologised, and discreetly sliced her past self's bag open with a quick, clean motion. She made a mental note to not ask how or where she acquired the ability to do that.

'If I fail this test because of you, Eureka, I swear to fucking God …' Lily yelled, her voice fading as she and Eureka hit the bottom step and continued their journey through the perfectly pruned canopy of the

campus, a trail of Eureka's belongings falling to the floor behind them.

'Smashed it,' winked Eureka, carefully pocketing the knife and jogging down the stairs with Kez. 'Now, all we need to do is find the key. Little rectangle. White with a blue tip. Got my name on it.'

Kez glanced at the beacon before they got started. They were cutting this damn close.

Frantically the two searched the debris. Kez, focused and determined, Eureka, distracted and nostalgic.

'I remember this pen!' Eureka said, beaming at a see-through ball-point covered in stars. 'Lost it ages ago.'

'You might as well take it back with us then,' Kez said, flicking through a notepad to see if the key had been used as a bookmark.

'Nah, all this stuff got returned,' Eureka said. 'I think all of it did anyway …'

With a suspicious glance left and right, Eureka pocketed the pen.

'Found it!' said Kez, holding out her prize with a smile. A small white cylinder, complete with a blue tip and, for some reason, a bit of string coming out of the bottom. 'Hang on, I've found like … five?'

'I'm not entirely sure this is the time for this conversation,' Eureka said, trying, god bless her, to hold back the grin as Kez held up a tampon like it was the holy grail. 'Maybe talk to your dad when you get back about the birds and the bees?'

Kez looked confused, about several things at once. To explain exactly what it was she was holding, Eureka performed an intricate, slightly graphic mime.

'Oh!' said Kez, finally understanding. 'I've heard about these! They look …'

'Uncomfortable?' nodded Eureka. 'Awful things. They're not used on planets, but when you're in a zero gravity environment …'

'Barbaric,' said Kez, finding the word but not yet the key. 'They look like a barbaric way to solve a problem.'

'You got any better ideas?' Eureka chuckled. 'I'll be sure to pass them on.'

'I just turn my cycle off,' shrugged Kez, continuing to search through various papers. Eureka dropped the pencil case shaped like a large can of soft drink that she had been holding.

'Turn it off?' she said, focusing her attention on this much more important information. 'Like, with pills or something?'

'What? No,' said Kez. 'Just in your NPC settings. I don't want to worry about all that so I just keep it off.'

‘You can just … turn it off? Turn it all off?’

As Kez nodded, Eureka considered that maybe being stranded in the future wouldn’t be so bad after all.

‘Right, I think that’s everything,’ said Kez, looking around for anything else, beyond relieved at the Moon’s lack of wind. ‘Phone, books, library card, a half-eaten packet of cookies, *way* too many coloured pencils, and some barbarism on a rope. No key.’

‘Dammit,’ said Eureka. ‘I know for a fact that I was the one registered to that key. Lily kept going on about how I’d lose it, but I was adamant that I wouldn’t, and I *know* I had it because otherwise how would we have taken our …’

Eureka trailed off, two pieces of logic connecting in her mind like a naff jigsaw.

‘We had our exam in a different ship,’ she sighed, remembering. ‘Temporary keys handed out as we arrived.’

Kez groaned in defeat.

‘You know what the worst part about this is?’ Eureka asked Kez’s slowly deflating form.

‘No,’ said Kez.

‘Lily was right,’ said Eureka. ‘I did lose the fucking key.’

Kez glared, and glared hard.

‘Oh, come on,’ blurted Eureka. ‘It was twenty-one years ago! Do you remember what you were doing twenty-one years ago?’

‘I was two years old!’ Kez yelled back. ‘TWO!’

‘My point stands,’ concluded Eureka, as the two of them flopped onto the bottom step, surrounded by a semicircle of Eureka’s old belongings.

‘What do we do now?’ Kez asked, holding her head in her hands.

‘We’ve just enough time to get to the landing pads, but I doubt we’ll find a key on the way,’ sighed Eureka. ‘I can’t believe we’ve fucked it.’

‘Can’t you?’ asked Kez.

Eureka thought about this for a moment.

‘Yeah, alright. I can believe we fucked it. Our luck had to run out sometime.’

‘Well, at least younger you passed her flying test today,’ said Kez as she rested her head on Eureka’s shoulder.

‘Yeah,’ smiled Eureka. ‘And she got a snog.’

‘Lily?’

‘First time,’ Eureka nodded.

‘Ah,’ said Kez. ‘That’s why you remember today.’

‘That’s why I didn’t mind losing the pen.’

A young man approached, walking slowly across the path, his face, just visible over a pile of books, like thunder. He nodded to the two of them as he climbed the stairs to the library, grumbling the entire way.

‘Robbie Onions,’ Eureka whispered after he passed. ‘He failed today.’

‘Poor kid,’ said Kez. ‘For the results, and the name.’

‘He was on the ship that the time fragment damaged,’ said Eureka guiltily. ‘Austin Lang claims another victim.’

At the top of the stairs, Robbie was throwing his heap of books into the return slot, each one sent off with a rude name. Once he had offloaded them all, he waddled down the stairs, joining Kez and Eureka on their one.

‘Nice pocket protector,’ he said, nodding at Eureka’s as he thrusted his chest forward, revealing his own.

‘Yours too,’ Eureka said, offering it a single nod as Kez flashed her a ‘get rid of him’ look.

‘Thanks,’ Robbie sighed. ‘Not that it helped today. Did you hear what happened?’

Eureka shook her head. Kez glanced down at the beacon, checking the time. She refused to let the universe die due to social awkwardness.

‘There Brandon and I were … you know Brandon? Never mind, there we were, mid-exam, when suddenly the ship just throws up all these errors. Smoke starts pouring in. It all goes wrong.’

‘That’s a shame,’ said Kez. ‘Anyway, we need to—’

‘I couldn’t see!’ continued Robbie. ‘I tried to vent the smoke, but I hit the eject button and had to parachute back to the ground for half an hour. HALF AN HOUR! I was so embarrassed.’

‘Awful,’ said Kez, standing. ‘Anyway, we—’

‘All because of this,’ Robbie said, holding up a piece of metal and causing Kez to sit back down. ‘I’ve no idea where it came from, but it tore through so many systems.’

‘Weird,’ said Eureka, eyes locked onto the fragment of time machine.

‘The odd thing about it is that it doesn’t match any of the metal in the ship,’ said Robbie. ‘I’m thinking of calling the exam board, making a complaint.’

‘You should do that,’ Kez nodded slowly. ‘If you want some help, I just passed my exams in … metallurgy.’

Robbie stood, causing Kez and Eureka to stand with him.

‘Nah,’ he said, pocketing the last piece of the time machine. ‘No

offence, but we've only just met. I'm going to go and talk to administration now. See ya.'

With that, Robbie took his leave.

'We need to stop him,' Kez whispered.

'I know,' said Eureka, an uncomfortable thought brewing as she felt the weight in her pocket. 'I know.'

Several steps away from them, Robbie stopped. 'Could you really do it?' he asked, leaning over his shoulder.

'Anything!' Kez said, attempting a smile that didn't look too panic stricken. 'Whatever you need.'

'Not you,' Robbie said, turning to face them, a smile on his lips. 'The other one. Could you do it?'

Kez glanced over to Eureka. There she stood, a glare fixed on Robbie, the knife in her hand.

'You,' she hissed.

'Surprise!' Robbie Onions grinned.

'How long?' she spat, her fingers reddening around the handle of the knife.

'The entire time,' Robbie grinned.

'We were *friends*.'

'I know,' he smiled. 'That just made it *funnier*.'

Robbie ignored the expletive-filled response as he withdrew the last piece of time machine from his jacket.

'I was wondering what you lot were travelling back for,' he said, tossing it into the air and catching it. 'Track down my origin point. Stop it all before it began. Very Osheen. How's he doing by the way? Neck still playing him up?'

A small group of students passed by, nattering excitedly. Eureka didn't even try to hide the knife.

'What do you want?' she growled.

'To be left alone,' said Robbie slowly. 'I've got the timeline just the way I like it, and all I'm doing is trying to keep it that way.'

'Which is why you've thrown a planet at us?' Kez asked.

'You're not getting it,' sighed Robbie. 'Today, Robbie Onions ruined Brandon's chance of becoming a pilot. That means he changes his degree, becomes an engineer, and ends up onboard the *Paracosm*. He fails to fix the ship, it goes boom, aliens notice, and a few decades later Earth is part of a *utopia*. Do you see yet? Everything must happen the way it was supposed to, for the good of all mankind.'

'You've killed people,' said Eureka bitterly.

‘Good people,’ nodded Robbie. ‘More than you’ll ever know. You’re welcome.’

With that, Robbie vanished into thin air.

‘No, NO!’ yelled Eureka, running over to the spot he was standing in and looking around wildly. ‘Damn him!’

With an anguished yell, she threw the knife down next to her, embedding its tip in the gap between two stone slabs. She sat, cross-legged, running through as many possible solutions as she could in her mind. Kez sat next to her and, with a sigh, leaned against Eureka.

‘Tired?’ Eureka asked softly.

‘Yeah,’ Kez replied.

‘Me too.’

Eureka closed her eyes, letting the noise of the wind in the trees calm her, her head leaning against Kez’s.

‘Robbie Onions never existed,’ she muttered. ‘I can’t wrap my head around that.’

‘Were you close?’ asked Kez.

‘Pretty close,’ Eureka nodded. ‘I had dinner with his family once.’

Kez bolted upright, her warmth quickly fading from Eureka’s side.

‘Well how does that work?’ she asked. ‘How could he have a family if he didn’t exist?’

Eureka tilted her head at Kez.

‘I have no idea,’ she admitted. ‘Accomplices? More than one Austin Lang?’

‘When we first met him, he told us to kill Austin Lang,’ said Kez, wrapping strings around pins in her mind. ‘He may not have meant him.’

‘Now there’s an unfun thought …’ said Eureka, checking the time remaining on the beacon. Seven minutes. They didn’t stand a chance.

‘Feel like giving up?’ Kez sighed, only half joking.

Before she replied, Eureka gazed out over her old stomping grounds, remembering how she felt as she strutted across these cobbles. Untouchable, like rain wouldn’t make her wet unless she wanted it to. In hindsight, she was a bit of a knob, but what she wouldn’t give for that misguided confidence again. For that immortality.

‘Always,’ said Eureka. ‘I always feel like giving up.’

Kez looked at her in disbelief.

‘Really?’

‘Of course,’ shrugged Eureka. ‘Giving up is easy, and fighting is hard. The trick is, you just have to remember why you’re fighting.’

‘You’ll have to teach me that trick,’ said Kez. ‘I love giving up. I’m great at it. If there was an award for giving up, I’d give up during the quarter finals.’

‘You had several opportunities to go home,’ said Eureka. ‘Why didn’t you take them?’

A light, fuzzy memory of Harker floated into Kez’s mind. The details of her face were lost to time, but the pull to bring her back, to save her, was as strong as ever.

‘I’m fighting for something,’ Kez realised.

‘Hey, look at that, you already know the trick,’ smiled Eureka, nudging her with a shoulder.

A little way in front of them, a young couple met, excitedly exchanging passing grades and embracing happily. Eureka couldn’t help but smile.

‘Is Austin right?’ Kez wondered. ‘If he’s telling the truth, and he’s the reason we have a utopia, then should we even stop him? We could ruin everything.’

‘“When a man stands up and says he knows what’s best, and that best involves killing others, that man knows nothing”,’ quoted Eureka.

Kez nodded at the words, taking the time to process them properly. ‘Who said that?’ she asked.

‘The hero in this old book I had as a kid,’ Eureka replied. ‘I can’t remember her name, haven’t read it in years, but I remember that quote word for word.’

‘Well, we’ve got six minutes left,’ chuckled Kez, checking the beacon that sat between them. ‘We could always go and grab a copy of it from the library. A souvenir of our trip.’

‘Oh god no,’ said Eureka. ‘Librarians are a fierce breed. Mark my words, if we stole a book, they’d track us down through space *and* time to retrieve it.’

Eureka chuckled. Kez didn’t. She had gotten to her feet and was now staring behind Eureka, eyes locked onto the massive stone building that towered over them.

‘We could look him up …’ she whispered.

Eureka stood, joining Kez in her stare.

‘Books,’ she whispered back. ‘Malcolm’s briefing said he destroyed them all …’

‘… unless we smuggle one back into the future.’

The women slowly turned to each other, giant smiles stretching across their faces. Then, movement. Kez pelted up the stairs, beacon in

hand, as Eureka snatched her library card from the pile of her belongings and followed in pursuit. Around four steps later, both of them stopped dead in their tracks as their ears were being assaulted by one of the most horrific sounds of all time. A pathetic set of drums played as the voice of an eldritch demon screamed its own name, competing for volume with a series of wet fart sound effects. It sounded to Kez like the actual death of music.[fn56]

'My ringtone!' Eureka said, skipping back down the steps to pick up her ringing phone. 'Haven't heard that one for a while!'

'Eureka!' said Kez, with the level of urgency the situation required. 'We really need to …'

Eureka wasn't listening. She was staring down at the phone, her eyes wide, her skin drained of colour.

'Eureka?' Kez tried again. 'You alright?'

'It's my dad,' she replied quietly.

Eureka looked up at Kez, past her to the library, and back to the phone. 'We don't have time,' Kez said.

'I know,' said Eureka, tapping her disguised voice off and answering the call. 'Hello?'

'Hello, sunshine,' said a small voice from the tinny speaker. 'Got any time for a chat?'

'Of course,' Eureka said, turning away from the library. 'I've got a few minutes spare.'

With a muttered series of panicked swear words, Kez jogged down the steps and snatched the library card out of Eureka's hand, replacing it with the beacon. 'Five minutes,' she said, trying not to let the sting of betrayal come out with her words, before pelting back up the stairs. She scanned in, flung the card back at Eureka, and disappeared out of sight.

'Everything alright?' Eureka's father asked. 'You sound tired.'

'Oh, you know, exams,' Eureka said, a burning sensation nestling in the back of her throat. 'I feel like they've aged me.'

'Too right,' he replied. 'Did I ever tell you about what happened to me during my exams? There we were, scribbling away, when this—'

'—ruddy great eagle came through the window and ate Bill Porter's exam right off the table. You thought it was an incredible coincidence, but you found out years later that he'd trained it to do that. That story?'

'Ah,' her father said. 'So I have told you.'

'About a thousand times,' Eureka smiled, picking the library card up

off the steps where it had landed. ‘Dad, I have something wonderful to tell you.’

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Lily and I are dating.’

Through the speaker, Eureka heard her dad leap to his feet, catapulting whatever had been on his lap tray into the distance.

‘Ya-hoo!’ he hollered. ‘Finally! After all these years!’

Eureka laughed as she felt tears cascading down the interior of her disguise. Through the phone, she could hear a small commotion. Someone was chastising him.

‘You alright, Dad?’ she asked. ‘That Mum?’

‘Your mother is out, it’s just the carer and me,’ he replied, getting back into his chair. ‘I’ve just sent cream of tomato across the room and Diane is livid.’

Eureka checked the beacon. Four minutes left.

‘I have to go now, Dad,’ she said, that feeling back in her throat. ‘Got an exam in a few.’

‘Alright, love,’ he chuckled. ‘Actually, before you go, did I ever tell you about what happened to me during my exams?’

‘About a thousand times,’ Eureka smiled, as she spoke to her dad for the last time. ‘Tell it again.’

‘We’ve got another one,’ said Ebenezer, looking over the main desk into the bowels of the library.

‘Another what, Ebby?’ asked Colm from the desk behind hers, adding new arrivals into the database as he spoke.

‘Someone’s crashed,’ she replied.

Colm turned and glanced around his colleague. After a moment, he saw her. A young woman with bright blue hair, sellotaping books to her leg as if her life depended on it.

‘Bloody exams,’ he muttered, turning back to his work. ‘Every year.’

‘I’ll go talk to her,’ sighed Ebenezer, placing a bookmark into her copy of an ancient book about terrible old video games, none of which she’d heard of. ‘Hold down the fort for me.’

Ebenezer left the reception via the wonders of the hinged tabletop, and proceeded down the sumptuously carpeted hall of books, occasionally catching the eye of a student, all of whom were one badly remembered theorem away from joining the lunatic at the end of the

hall.

‘Looking for anything in particular?’ Ebenezer asked as she approached the student, a kind smile erected in defence. The student lunged forward and grabbed Ebenezer by the lapels, a recognisable blind panic in her eyes.

‘IneedtofindAustinLangandIcan’tandI’mtryingtotakeasmanybooks aspossiblebutIdon’tknowhowanyofthisworkssoI’mattachingthemt omyselfandmypartnerwhoissupposedtobehelpingmeistalkingtoherdeaddadanc …’

Ebenezer nodded, forcibly removing the student’s hands from her lapels. ‘Austin Lang was it?’ she asked, rolling her head back slightly in thought. ‘The terrorist? Yeah, I’m pretty sure we have a few on him.’

With that she walked down a few aisles, the student following, bouncing anxiously with each step before they turned down a particularly dark one. A few paces in, she ran her hand along several spines, stopped when she’d found the right book, and extracted it with her thin fingers.

‘Here you go,’ she said with that defensive smile again. ‘This should be all you need.’

The blue-haired woman looked at the book as she took it into her hands. She read the title, re-read it, then hugged it tight. With red, wet eyes, she looked up at Ebenezer.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

‘Did you get it?’ asked a nerdy boy, suddenly poking his head around the aisle. The antsy student held the book up, hugged the boy tightly in celebration, and then vanished.

Ebenezer stood there a moment, staring at the space where the students had been standing a second ago. After a time she returned to her desk, sat down, and sniffed her cup of tea with suspicion.

‘Colm?’ she said after a time. ‘Teleporters don’t work in the library do they?’

‘Nope,’ he replied, eyes glued to his database. ‘Not unless we build a platform for them.’

‘Right,’ Ebenezer nodded. After a few moments of staring into the distance, she had another question.

‘Colm?’ she asked.

Colm sighed and spun around in his chair.

‘What?’

Ebenezer spun around too, the two of them eye to eye, feet from each other. ‘You know how you always tell new students that this

place is haunted?' she asked.

'Yeah?'

'Have you ever seen … a *ghost* in here?' she asked. 'Something that you couldn't explain?'

Colm laughed a giant, hearty laugh. 'Nah,' he said after calming down. 'It's just something I say to stop the students from having sex in the less referenced areas. It was either that or randomise the Dewey decimal system.'

With that, he spun back around in his chair, laughing into his database. Ebenezer nodded to herself and went back to work, stopping only to pour her tea into the nearby plant.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Save Time

LUCAS | 2783

The lights flickered again as Eureka stepped over yet another broken wall panel lying on the carpeted floor of *Lucas*. The most recent salvo of Ipricus had done a number on various parts of the station, damaging most, obliterating the rest. Eureka glanced at the planet out of the window, its surface now the entire view.

The lights turned off and showed no sign of coming back on.

'Perfect,' Eureka grumbled, stumbling her way along the corridor, one hand on the cool glass, another held out in front of her. 'Love this.'

While Malcolm worked on the bridge, assimilating and summarising the book that she and Kez had recovered, Eureka decided to take a few moments to clear her head. Now, ten minutes later, she'd been so lost in thought and climbed and descended so many sets of stairs that she hadn't a clue where she was on the pitch-black ship. Yet, even here in the darkness, she could still see the face of a friend who never existed. She tried to shake him away, but he persisted, morphing back and forth between identities, like Austin was scratching away at her memories, unmaking them. A gentle whoosh up ahead wafted a sliver of air Eureka's way, indicating that a nearby door had detected her and opened. A weak blue light emanating from the room drew Eureka towards it, like the proverbial moth, and moments later she had reached its glow, happy to be out of the dark.

Happy, that is, until she saw the silhouette. A figure stood in the room, arms by its sides, backlit by the faint light of a dataflake that someone had left propped up against a stack of books. It was too dark to make out any details, but from the light Eureka could see passing under its feet, it was clearly floating.

'Hello?' she asked, taking a few tentative steps into the room. 'Are you alright?'

The figure didn't move, opting instead to hover menacingly in the centre of the room. As she approached, Eureka noticed that strings were rising out of various parts of it, vanishing into the ceiling, like an abandoned puppet. Eureka split into two, logic and reason telling her

to run, emotion and curiosity keeping her on the path. Her heart raced as she entered arm's reach of the figure, a thick stench of bleach emanating from it. She reached out, eager to touch, eager to understand.

Then, when she was mere inches away, the lights flicked back on.

Staring back at Eureka through glazed, milky eyes was Osheen. His head was gently lolling to one side, jaw slack, skin devoid of almost all colour. With a cry of fear, Eureka threw a punch at the corpse, cracking it in the side of the jaw, before she bolted out of the room, straight into the mechanical arms of Morag.

'Steady on,' Morag said, lifting a tray of tools out of the way just in time. 'Some of us explode you know.'

Eureka tried to talk, she really did. High-pitched bursts of air flew out of her mouth, as her hands jabbed in the direction of the zombie of her former boss. Morag shook her head, rolling her eyes in irritation.

'Why doesn't anyone ever read my signs?' she sighed, pulling a scrap of paper off the window of the medical bay door and handing it to Eureka.

'"Knock or have nightmares"?' Eureka read, her hands threatening to shake the ink from the paper. 'But … the door was open.'

'Ah, shit,' muttered Morag, stretching an arm to place her tray down inside the room. 'Doors open during a power cut. Sorry, that one's on me.'

'What are you doing to him?' Eureka asked quietly, tilting her body slightly to peek back into the room. Osheen's body, covered in a nanobot gown, was being suspended somehow, with wires exiting his body from his ears, nose, and mouth. At his neck, thick stitches criss-crossed roughly, holding the two halves of it together. Next to him, unseen until now, Bea was suspended in much the same way.

'NPC recovery,' said Morag, sliding the door shut and re-adhering her sign to interrupt Eureka's curiosity. 'He doesn't have an NPC port like most folk, so I've got to go in manually.'

'Manually?' Eureka gulped.

Morag nodded. The details weren't necessary. 'Now, just to be square with you, I can't say any more,' Morag said firmly. 'Alphonse has given me orders, and I'm carrying them out.'

'But wouldn't …' Eureka began, before a headshake from Morag stopped her in her tracks.

'I can't say any more,' Morag repeated. Eureka nodded and, after one last quick glance back at the sign, went on her way, an odd sensation

gnawing at her mind, like she'd just missed something vitally important.

Kez gazed out of the window of the cafeteria, watching a few metal crates rotating lazily as they drifted towards Ipricus. A single deck above her, a very haphazard welding job creaked as it held back the air pressure of the entire station.

'This is incredible,' Theo said, slurping down the final dregs of his second bowl of ribollita. 'I could eat this forever.'

'I think we made enough for that to be possible,' Iscah grinned, spooning out another ladleful. 'Alphonse thinks he's cooking for fifty at all times.'

'Force of habit,' shrugged Alphonse, inhaling a slice of soup-soaked bread. Theo watched, fascinated, as it burned to cinders inside his body.

With a squeak, the door to the cafeteria slid open halfway, allowing Eureka to squeeze inside.

'The hero of the hour!' Alphonse boomed, jumping up from his seat in a sign of respect. 'Fancy some ribollita?'

Eureka shook her head and sat down, the image of Osheen's cold, dead face preventing her from having anything even close to an appetite.

'You alright?' Kez asked, concern across her face.

'I'd like to go home now,' Eureka said softly, flicking her eyes towards Ipricus outside, screaming silently on its frozen approach. 'It feels like the right time.'

A silence fell upon the table, unless you had the ability to hear hearts break, in which case the table suddenly became very loud.

'Excellent idea,' said Theo through a mouthful of soft vegetables. 'You deserve it, especially after the two of you ran that last mission alone.'

'I agree with Theo,' said Iscah, squeezing Eureka's hand. 'You've done so much for us.'

'I'll miss you,' Kez said, her voice gently rasping as the words unexpectedly snuck out of her mouth.

'No,' said Alphonse.

'Alphonse—' began Theo, taken aback.

'We simply have a technical limitation,' Alphonse sighed. 'The

machine struggles with single direction travel, and if any part of it goes wrong, it could destroy us before we get a chance to complete the mission.'

'Oh,' said Eureka, her voice smaller than ever. 'OK then. That makes sense.'

Alphonse knelt down next to Eureka, the lava in his head sloshing softly.

'The group is right, you've done so much. I just need you to stick around for another few hours,' he said. 'Besides, the current plan doesn't have you going on any more missions.'

Eureka's quizzical look was followed by three more, as Alphonse realised that this was the first moment he'd shared his upcoming plan of action out loud.

'The next trip is going to just be a single one of you,' Alphonse said, standing back up and entering his captain stance. 'It's clear now that the new beacon isn't up to scratch and, honestly, I don't want to risk it with more than one person.'

'I'll go,' said Theo, raising his spoon-equipped hand.

'No,' said Alphonse. 'It will be Kez.'

The room immediately burst into a loud argument. Kez however, heard none of it, as all of the noise fell away, muffled by the blood pumping in her ears and the darkness creeping into her vision.

Three floors above the argument, one of Malcolm's tendrils turned to the final page of the book Kez and Eureka had recovered. He scanned the page, absorbing all of the details, and summarised them into a single, neat paragraph on his NPC.

He closed the book, backed up both the original text and his summary, and breathed for the first time in an hour.

'We have found him,' he whispered to himself.

Kez leaned against the wall of the corridor, trying her hardest not to have a panic attack.

'Why me?' she exclaimed at Alphonse as he left the cafeteria, three glowering faces watching the door close behind him. 'Out of that lot. Me!?'

'Because,' Alphonse said, placing his hand on the door, 'I trust you.'

Down Alphonse's fingers ran his fleet of nanobots, spreading out across the door as they made contact with it, ending up equally spaced across its face. 'Soundproofing,' Alphonse said, as the nanobots created the inverse sound across the door itself, nullifying the energy of its waves. 'Don't wanna be overheard.'

'What's going on?' Kez asked, pulling herself off the wall and adding a small amount of distance between herself and her captain.

Alphonse sighed, slumping his shoulders. His internal lava slowed, lowering its glow. 'Since Osheen passed, I've become increasingly worried that someone onboard this ship has been working against us,' he said solemnly.

'A mole?' Kez whispered back, shooting nervous glances in every direction. 'On *Lucas*?!'

'Potentially,' nodded Alphonse. 'I can't shake the gut feeling that Austin is aware of too much. He's appeared literally every time we've travelled, yet according to your report, he only found out why we were travelling during the last trip? I smell interference.'

Alphonse paced the corridor briefly, preparing his next words carefully.

'If it's anyone, it'll be one of the time travellers,' he said. 'You and Eureka reported that Austin was using technology that looks suspiciously like Osheen's disguises which, as far as I know, has form limitations.'

This thought hit Kez like a runaway Homeship. Theo, Eureka, Iscah. After all they'd been through, one of them might be the very monster they were looking for.

'Robbie Onions,' Kez said softly. 'Eureka knew him for years and it was Austin all along.'

'Exactly,' grunted Alphonse. 'He's willing to play a damn long game.'

Alphonse placed his hand back upon the door. A single nanobot climbed back onto his body and entered his NPC port, confirming that the soundproofing was still working. Kez realised that Alphonse must have turned his wireless connections off.

'On that note, and for transparency's sake, I must admit that Morag is undergoing a fairly ghoulish procedure to be sure that Osheen wasn't involved,' Alphonse said quietly. 'Results are good so far, Bea has been assisting Morag which has made the process easier, but I'm not leaving anything to chance. I've even got a drone out there searching for Clive's body.'

'Then, why trust me?' Kez asked.

‘I must admit to a certain amount of subterfuge,’ he said, grimacing faintly. ‘Malcolm’s task list was a test of sorts. To see if you’d compromise key systems. He checked your work during your last trip and found it clean. Sorry.’

‘Given the situation, I understand,’ said Kez, seriously grateful that she’d double checked all her wiring.

‘Also, you fell into a black hole with no witnesses and were only saved by dumb luck,’ Alphonse chuckled softly. ‘Austin is many things, but I’m not sure he’s a klutz.’

Before Kez could reply, Malcolm arrived, spinning happily.

‘We have found him,’ he buzzed, before vanishing through an exposed conduit, no doubt ending up in the cafeteria, ready to brief the team.

‘Here we go then,’ Alphonse said, straightening out his uniform with a tug, reclaiming his nanobots, and opening the door to Kez’s final briefing.

‘*Austin Lang: The Seven-Day Terror*,’ Malcolm read, as everyone’s NPCs and ECs flooded with pages from the book. ‘A dull read, yet informative.’

‘Skip the review,’ said Alphonse. ‘Where is he?’

‘Here,’ said Malcolm, displaying a multitude of still images of Austin, scanned from the book, seemingly all taken in a single flat. ‘Chippenham, England, Earth, 2034.’

Following this, news articles about Austin appeared. His face glowering on front pages, blurred like his name.

‘Excuse the censorship,’ Malcolm apologised. ‘Affinity software deletes any and all files that display his name or likeness.’

‘So, he was a terrorist?’ Theo asked, reading the word about forty times across the various headlines.

‘Seemingly,’ said Malcolm. ‘He appeared out of nowhere, an unknown to local and national authorities, and broadcast himself from a false house for a week.’

‘A false house?’ Kez asked.

‘An artificial construction, made to look exactly like a place he was not,’ said Malcolm. ‘After almost a week of broadcasting, he remotely committed a series of bombings over a twenty-four-hour period.’

‘Bombings?’ Iscah asked. ‘That seem odd to anyone else?’

‘He didn’t strike me as a bombings kind of guy,’ Kez agreed.

‘According to the author, in between irritating stories about his own

life, nobody was killed in these attacks. Each came with an ample warning,' said Malcolm.

'That lines up with what he said last time we saw him,' Eureka nodded. 'He seemed to regret killing, like his hand had been forced.'

'Tell that to Osheen,' Alphonse growled, crushing an entire loaf of bread in his hand.

'After the attacks,' continued Malcolm, 'Austin was visited by a man whose identity was never discovered. Moments later, Austin shot himself through the head, ending the stream of video.'

'And convincing the world that he was dead in the process,' Alphonse grumbled. 'Any leads on the visitor? Seems like someone we need to track down.'

'No need,' said Malcolm. 'I already know who the visitor is. It is Kez.'

As the room turned to her, Kez attempted to make her own body language seem less suspicious. She failed.

'Uh-whuh?' she asked succinctly.

'I have prepared a disguise that matches that figure's likeness,' said Malcolm. 'This way, we can be sure you will successfully meet Austin on this trip.'

'So we're going to keep the timeline straight by … interfering with it?' said Iscah, an eyebrow raised.

'Just like Austin claims to be doing,' Alphonse nodded. 'From there, Kez's mission will be purely information gathering. After that, I think it's time we abandon this station and let the Affinity take control of the situation. Hell, if our communications were working I'd've contacted them already.'

'Any particular information you want gathered?' Kez asked.

'Yeah,' said Alphonse. 'Find out how we can stop this prick. For real this time.'

'I don't think he'll tell me that …' Kez muttered to herself.

'OK, I have to say this again,' Iscah said, pointing at Kez. 'Why Kez? The three of us are, no offence Kez, vastly more qualified.'

'MY DECISION IS FINAL,' Alphonse boomed, his uniform straining as his body began expanding under it, his lava rushing around wildly. 'Now,' he continued, taking deep breaths to calm himself 'Malcolm, where were—'

Alphonse stopped talking as the door to the cafeteria slid closed, sparking slightly as it moved. Kez was no longer in the room. Alphonse cupped his head in his hands.

‘Do you think she’ll be OK?’ Eureka asked quietly.

‘She has to be,’ sighed Alphonse. ‘She just has to be.’

Kez bolted into the grubby bathroom, kicking her shoes off as she climbed onto the sink and leaned back against the cool mirror, the crack along its surface pressing into her back.

Why me? she wondered. *Why does it have to be me?*

Her thoughts echoed around in her mind, bouncing off the silence. She tucked her legs under her chin, wrapping her arms around them, feeling her heart beat.

I can’t do this.

For a moment, Kez seemed to exist outside of time. Each of her breaths seemed to overlap each other, with an endless distance between them. After minutes, hours, or years, someone knocked on the door.

‘Fancy a chat?’ asked Theo as he walked in and hopped up onto the sink next to Kez.

‘Can we swap?’ Kez said into her own knees. ‘You go on the super dangerous mission, and I’ll go and catch dinosaurs or whatever.’

Theo smiled, crossing his legs under himself. He withdrew something from his pocket and handed it to Kez.

‘Here,’ he said.

Kez took the object and frowned at it.

‘A dataflake?’ she asked.

‘On there is a write-up of our whole mission to date,’ Theo said. ‘Alphonse thinks you should have it, so you don’t … you know.’

‘Blow up time?’ Kez offered.

‘Basically,’ chuckled Theo.

‘Oh great,’ Kez said, placing the dataflake down onto the side of the sink. ‘Nice to know he doesn’t believe in me.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Theo. ‘He believes that you’re up to the challenge of this mission and wants you to be as well-equipped as possible.’

Kez smiled, putting a serious dent in her panicked mood. ‘You think I should go?’ she asked.

‘I think you’ll do what’s right,’ Theo nodded. ‘Good people usually do.’

The bathroom door swung open again as Eureka and Iscah entered

with a pair of waves.

'How we doing in here?' Iscah asked with a half-smile.

'Terrified,' said Kez. 'Do you think I should do this?'

'Absolutely not,' said Iscah without hesitation. 'Not at all.'

Theo shot her a look, somewhere between 'The fuck?' and 'I will kill you.'

'It could be a trap,' shrugged Iscah. 'Everything else so far has been.'

'It's dangerous, sure,' said Theo. 'But what's the alternative?'

'Eureka?' Kez asked, desperate to hear her thoughts.

'You are the best of us,' she said eventually. 'Alphonse is right to pick you.'

'Eureka …' Iscah said, the disappointment in her voice immeasurable.

'Back on the moon, I abandoned the mission to talk to my dad,' Eureka said, the tears once again coming thick and fast. 'My greatest regret in life, not having the time to tell my dad about Lily and me, it's been lifted. Kez did that, and she finished the mission without me as well. Yeah, we've got more training than her, but we damn sure don't have the heart.'

'I just don't think that—' Iscah began, before Eureka cut her off.

'She also left me with the beacon.'

A hush fell on the group, disrupted only by the rhythmic dripping of the sink's faulty tap.

'Yeah, OK,' Iscah said. 'Kez is the one for this job.'

Kez smiled, realising just how much she'd come to trust this team, one of whom might not be who they say they are.

'What's the twenty-first century like?' Kez asked, pushing the thought out of her mind with inane chat. 'Nice?'

'Eh,' said Eureka, wobbling a hand. 'Not great.'

'In what way?'

'Technology's role rose up faster than the human race could cope with,' said Theo. 'Tribalism and power mixed with a heating climate. We nearly didn't make it.'

Kez gulped.

'The worst part though,' whispered Iscah. 'The worst part was the meat they ate.'

'People were still eating meat in the twenty-first century?!' Kez gasped, shocked. 'I thought that was … caveman shit?'

'Nope,' shuddered Iscah. 'In the twenty-first century, humans didn't just eat meat. They would take an animal, overfeed it for its entire life,

kill it, pulp it, bulk it up with water and sugar, and reform it before feeding it to … children.'

Kez reached behind herself, mentally mapping out the location of the sink in case it became necessary. 'That's horrible,' she whispered.

'It gets worse,' said Eureka. 'The shape they reformed the meat into … sometimes it was a cartoon of the animal that the meat was from.'

Kez retched.

'Worse still …' Theo said, holding back his last meal. 'The face of the cartoon animal …'

Theo took a second, mentally strengthening himself for the next three words.

'… it was smiling.'

Kez began to vomit uncontrollably.

Kez appeared in the time machine and breathed a sigh of relief. For a second there, she was worried that Malcolm's short-range transport was going to fling her into space again.

'This is an information-gathering mission, Kez,' Alphonse's broadcasted voice said over the screaming power of the time machine. 'Find out what you can, and get the hell out of there.'

Kez looked down at the beacon in her hand, a new button dangling off it, attached by two wires. She patted her pockets, checking that everything she'd been handed was still on her.

'We'll pull you back after two hours,' Alphonse continued as, behind him, Malcolm frantically jabbed at buttons and flipped switches. 'If you are in danger, just hit that button.'

'It'll pull me back early?' yelled Kez over the tumult.

'No,' said Alphonse, now barely audible. 'It'll just teleport you to the other side of the planet where you can wait out the remaining time.'

With a pulse, the temporal focal point fell away, taking space with it. Kez widened her stance in preparation for whatever rough landing was ahead.

'Good luck, Kez,' said Alphonse, surrounded by the rest of her time-travelling colleagues. 'Whatever happens next, thank you.'

The time machine fired, slapping spacetime across both of its cheeks and flinging Kez backwards in time for a showdown. In all the chaos, Kez failed to notice a vitally important message on her NPC display. She'd picked up a stowaway.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Hollow House

Kez's memories returned faster than ever as she swam through the timeless shadows.

'Why do I only see you when I travel backwards in time?' she asked.

'TIME!' uttered the first thing.

'I'm going to need more than that,' muttered Kez.

'MEMORIES!' squeaked the second.

Kez squeezed her fists tight, trying to not let her irritation leak into her words.

'I'm just going to float quietly for a bit,' she sniped. 'If either of you two feel like giving me a straight answer, I'll be right here.'

'IT ISN'T OUR FUCKING FAULT YOUR TINY BRAIN CAN'T REMEMBER BACKWARDS!' boomed the first.

Kez floated, stunned by the outburst.

'Oh well done,' sighed the second thing. 'There goes our mystique.'

'WHAT?!' Kez yelled, clawing the darkness for answers as time pulled her back onto its relentless path.

CHIPPENHAM, ENGLAND | 2034

Kez cracked into existence slightly too high, and came down hard with the rain. With a deep, splattering squish, she landed on sodden, uneven grass, stumbled backwards, and fell inelegantly into a hedge. 'Fucking fabulous,' she mumbled from her resting place, deep in sopping foliage. With a grunt of effort, she threw her arms out and rode the momentum into a standing position. Instinctively, she went to tap her neck, but remembered the horrors of the last time she got her disguise wet, and decided to activate it at a later moment, when she was out of this awful weather. This was her first time experiencing rain, and it was considerably more awful than she thought it would be. While Kez made a mental note to delete those rain soundscapes she listened to as she fell asleep each night. A flash of lightning lit up the heavy clouds above, giving Kez a brief glimpse of her surroundings and a shot of adrenaline. She was in the garden of an old, large house. Abandoned,

if the boarded-up windows, dead flowerbeds, and crumbling masonry were anything to go by. Kez took a step towards the house, her heart racing. *I can do this*, Kez thought, right up until the first crack of thunder sent her pelting into a nearby shed, one that was less a structure and more a heap of cobwebs that someone had haphazardly thrown timber at.

Planets, she thought while sitting on the floor against an unopened sack of fertiliser. *I just don't understand the hype.*

It was in that moment, scared, wet and alone, that Kez started to cry. Not heavily, but enough to release some of the pressure that had been building up over the last few days. Tears met rain on her cheeks, and they quietly dripped together to the floor, kicking up tiny circles of dust where they landed. *I can't,* Kez thought. *I just can't.*

More tears fell, each one a moment of anxiety or fear, pressurised and made physical, like diamonds of the psyche.

I disagree, said a voice inside Kez's head.

Kez jumped at the noise before she'd processed it as a voice.

E-NA?

Hi, she replied. *I think I owe you an apology.*

I accept, said Kez, suddenly feeling warmer.

You haven't heard it yet.

I owe you one too. They cancel out.

Water under the bridge?

A tsunami's worth. No more bridge.

Is that good?

I don't know.

E-NA chuckled, filling Kez with strength she wasn't aware she needed.

Thanks for coming, she said, wiping her face dry.

You know what they say. The captain goes down with her ship, E-NA replied.

Kez went to move, but hesitated.

I thought I was the captain, she said.

Spoken like a true ship, chuckled E-NA.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the shed, revealing the contents of the opposite wall to Kez, as well as a lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. Kez stood, clocked the light switch next to her, closed the door she had barged through moments ago, double checked for windows, and flicked on the light. On the far wall, which wasn't that far away, was a red board, scuffed on all of its edges. It was covered in

small holes, some filled with pegs, others with spiders. Hanging off the pegs were tools, most rusted and unusable, except for one. An old-style ratchet screwdriver.

Kez walked over to the rack, floorboards creaking as she went, and carefully relieved it of the screwdriver. She twisted it slowly in her hands, enjoying each tick of the mechanism as it vibrated up towards the head. Kez smiled. This was a gorgeous piece of classic, utterly outdated design.

Dad would love this, Kez thought, staring at the screwdriver. For a brief moment, she allowed herself the fantasy of handing it over to him on his birthday. Watching his eyes light up. That warm smile. He'd probably have it framed.

Things go missing all the time, E-NA offered cheekily.

I forgot that you were a terrible influence, Kez chuckled. Carefully, she placed the screwdriver back, flicked off the light, and opened the door again. The elements rushed inside as thunder rolled over the shed, catching Kez's breath and causing her to hesitate. *Here we go,* she thought, nodding to herself. With a deep breath, she pivoted on the spot, headed to the back wall, grabbed the screwdriver off the board, and pocketed it. Kez ran out of the shed and across the tatty lawn towards the house, crouching to stay hidden but giving up on that the instant she realised that her legs still ached from her trip to the moon. Halfway there, she noticed a door nestled between several boarded-up windows, and slightly course-corrected to it. She scampered up the few steps leading up to the back porch and threw herself against the chipped white paint of the walls as she arrived.

Under the cover of decaying wood, she tapped her disguise on. Briefly, she thought she heard a yell from inside the house, but suddenly became too distracted by the door itself.

The fuck … ?

Kez noticed the door's lock, or rather, locks. She counted nine, from keyholes to fingerprint scanners.

This guy really didn't want any visitors, E-NA said, as Kez ordered her nanobots to pick the locks. With a uniform beep of recognition, countless tiny robots sped into each locking mechanism, pushing pins, hacking circuits, and shifting a small deadbolt. After a few seconds, the door began to slowly swing open. The robots, expended, converted themselves into dust.

That's all your nanobots, E-NA reported. *Let's hope he doesn't have any more locks to pick.*

The moment the door was open wide enough, Kez slipped into the darkness of the house, slowly closing the door behind her with a click.

And … now I can't see.

After giving her eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness, Kez started to make out some of the shapes in the room. It looked like it had once been a kitchen, but everything of value had been stripped out long ago, leaving a few dilapidated cupboards; a dusty, lone chair, on which sat an empty fruit bowl; and a glowing word on the floor.

'Me'? Kez thought, reading it. She bent down and picked one of the letters up. Its glow faded, and Kez realised that it was simply branding letters that had fallen off a nearby fridge. The glow, however, was far more important.

Light.

Kez dropped to the ground next to the 'E', hands pressing against the cool lino, as she pressed her head as close to the ground as she could, looking for the source. *Under that door*, she thought, noticing the thin line of light just about visible under it. She crept over, pressing her ear against its rotting surface as she arrived, and listened, hoping to hear something over the rain crashing against the boarded windows and her own heartbeat. For a moment she wondered just how many beats she had left.

Kez grasped the handle and twisted it gently, bracing herself for whatever lay beyond it. Once the door was open a crack, she peered inside.

It was a room, almost the entire size of the rest of the house, which appeared to actually be the rest of the house. The walls and floors that had stood here previously had been ripped away, leaving a single, cavernous interior. It looked to Kez like this job had been done in a hurry, or at the very least in the dark, as the majority of the rooms had been haphazardly cut right through the middle, spilling segments of carpet and occasionally furniture onto the floors below. A few new-looking dark red beams seemed to be the only thing stopping the entire manor from collapsing in on itself like a heavy, wooden soufflé.

In the centre of this room, suspended six feet off the ground by large black scaffolding, was a wooden cuboid, around six or seven metres wide and covered in boarded-up windows. Emerging out of all six of its sides was a jumble of cables and piping, like spaghetti from a sieve with slightly too big holes. Circling this was a massive oval rail, slightly tilted and supporting a large array of lights and coloured diffusers. *False house*, Kez thought to herself.

Inside the cuboid, Kez could now hear something. Movement. Thudding. She stepped into the room. After half a circle of the box, Kez spotted a metal staircase leading up one side of it. At the top, built into the cuboid, was a dark green door, surprisingly imposing for how normal it appeared to be. With a hand firmly clasping the rail, Kez began her ascent up the eight stairs, pausing on each one to press her ear to the suspended room. On the fifth step, something went crashing to the floor inside. Was he fighting something?

Quickly, Kez finished her climb. She glanced over the door that stood in front of her. No visible locks, just a handle. She placed a hand on it and twisted it lightly, a small jolt shooting through her when she realised that it was unlocked.

Good luck, whispered E-NA.

Kez opened the door and was immediately greeted by a nasty waft of air rushing past her, desperate to get out of the stuffy, mock one-bedroom flat that lay in front of her. At the far side of the room, standing on a chair and fiddling with his ceiling fan, was the man she'd met on several occasions across space and time.

'Austin,' Kez said, her hands raised to show that she was unarmed. 'I'm here to talk.'

Austin, surprise thickly plastered onto his face, jumped down, knocking the fan as he went and causing it to spin slightly. Kez spotted a camera tied to one of the blades.

'Yes … ?' Austin said cautiously, his voice cracking as if he hadn't spoken for a while. 'Who might you be?'

Kez took a step forward, her hands still out, palms up, shaking.

'My name is Kezia,' she said, trying to smile and just looking a little bit sick. 'I'd like to talk to you about time travel.'

'Ah … ummm …' Austin said quietly to himself, nodding. 'Do you mind if I just try something first?'

'OK,' Kez said, aware of what was to come.

Austin took a couple of half steps to his right, and opened his cutlery drawer. From there he pulled out a gun, put it under his chin, and gave Kez a little smile. Austin Lang's brains and body went their separate ways as the roar of the gunshot took Kez's eardrums out of service for a short while, probably for the best with the sheer amount of squawking birds that she shared the room with. The momentum of the bullet into the underside of Austin's skull threw his corpse backwards. It tugged on a dangling cable as it fell and, unknown to Kez, ended the very last of his livestream feeds.

Something rattled across the floor over to Kez, stopping right in front of her. It was a small metal cylinder, crumpled at one end. She picked it up, but dropped it immediately, the heat of it singeing her fingers.

'Careful,' Austin said, climbing to his feet and rubbing the back of his perfectly intact head. 'Those things can kill you.'

After a violent shake of his head, as if to see if anything inside was rattling, Austin threw his gun into the sink as he headed over to his array of birds. One by one, he began removing the covers from their cages.

'Sorry, boys,' Austin whispered and clicked at his feathered friends. 'Didn't mean to give you a fright.'

With a liberal application of small green treats poked through bars, Austin returned to the living area of this open plan room and put his hands together, moving them round each other uncomfortably.

'Well that's interesting isn't it?' Austin said, a smile crawling its way up one side of his face. 'A man kills himself in front of you, gets back up, and you don't even flinch.'

With a wave of his hand, Austin offered Kez a position on his sofa, swiped a few boxes off so she could sit down, and walked over to his kitchen.

'Tea?' he asked, brandishing an electric kettle.

Kez nodded, watching his preparation of the drink closely.

'I have a question if you don't mind,' Austin said, filling the kettle. 'Are you with the government?'

Kez shook her head. 'No.'

'Good,' Austin said, looking quite relieved. 'Fantastic news.'

Kez then remembered that she actually was with the government.

'I mean … not the government you're thinking of.'

Nope. That sounded bad.

'Space,' she said, not making it better. 'Space government.'

'Space … government …' Austin repeated slowly, glancing into the sink. His gun glinted back.

'I'm from the future,' Kez blurted, the final syllables hitting the sort of notes that a soprano would kill for.

'The future?' Austin asked, some new emotion that Kez didn't recognise flittering across his eyes. 'Can you … prove it?'

Kez nodded, tapping her disguise off, revealing her true self. Austin, who was certainly not expecting the man sitting on his sofa to suddenly morph into a different person, leapt backwards, stumbled

over the chair he was standing on earlier, and went crashing to the ground.

'Holy shit!' he said, staggering back to his feet. 'What was that?'

'Future stuff,' Kez said, her stomach settling as she realised how much of an upper hand she had in this conversation. 'A disguise for when I travel.'

'Travel?' Austin asked, but he cut the idea short as his eyes narrowed onto Kez. He rushed forward, grabbing her head with both hands, and stared directly into her eyes, his pupils rapidly moving, like he was speed reading her.

'What are we doing?' Kez asked through slightly squeezed cheeks.

'I've met you before,' he whispered, unblinking. 'Where?'

'A long, long time ago,' Kez said. 'That was … you, right?'

Austin let her go and stepped back. He stared at his own hands briefly, before shaking that thought off too as he retreated back to the kitchen.

'Sort of,' he offered. 'It's a long story.'

'Tell it,' Kez said, doing her best impression of being nonchalant.

The kettle clicked. Austin scooped it up and started pouring boiling water into two grimy mugs.

'I'd rather not,' he said. 'Not now.'

Austin heaved a great sigh, as well as a mountain of sugar into his own cup. With a brief stir from a small spoon, he began to make his way over to Kez.

'At least tell me where Harker is,' Kez said softly, her words leaving a silence in the air, broken only by the sound of two mugs of tea shattering upon the ground.

Chapter One

Harker

London, England | 2034

The exterior of *Va te faire foutre*, Austin Lang's favourite restaurant and London's home of culinary affluence, looked beautiful in the gloriously hot January sun. The curved glass front glinted in the deep orange light, the water feature dappled short-lived rainbows across the façade, and the protestors chained to it were really giving it the beans.

Austin chuckled to himself as he entered. From its construction in 2029, one that showered previously Grade II listed debris onto the clever placards of protestors, to its opening night in 2030, when a series of bright spotlights forced people under a certain income bracket to look away from the premises, to the recent news that it was directly responsible for the extinction of several delicious species of animal, *Va te faire foutre* had built up quite a negative reputation with the general populace. If anything, this made its usual clientele like it even more.

Before Austin's second foot had even entered the building, the maître d' was shaking him by the hand, half-expecting to find a tip that was never there. 'Mr Lang!' he exclaimed, natural French sexuality doing wild things to his eyebrows. 'Your guest has already been seated. Please, do follow me at your next available convenience.'

'Lead the way, Phillip,' Austin replied to Charles, clapping a hand onto his back and following him into the last dying gasps of hyper capitalism. He loved it here, even though it was the sort of place that the citizens of El Dorado would probably call 'a bit much'.

After slaloming around the life-size ivory statues of elephants and tanks filled with celebrity fish, the maître d' sat Austin at his favourite table, nestled quietly slap bang in the middle of everything and everyone, took his order of a meal made of nothing but truffles, saffron, and plumage, and left, leaving Austin to turn his attention to the completely hideous old man now sitting opposite him.

This man's name was Professor Dimitrios Wardrobe, arguably the most renowned scientist in the world. He'd recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for mathematics so complicated that nobody really knew what he was on about, cured the common cold (as well as three of the

less common ones), and was the only person in history to achieve a three-digit score on the fiendish BBC quiz show *Only Connect*.[fn57]

While chewing open-mouthed on something endangered, Austin snapped his fingers and a waiter brought over a pile of papers the height of a vertical breadstick. 'Tricky, but doable. Correct?' Austin asked while swallowing a delicately baked beak fragment. Dimitrios placed glasses thick enough to be bomb proof on his nose and picked up the top sheet off the stack. He read for a while before suddenly making an expression that was so surprised his eyes were in danger of expanding over his entire face.

The first step of Austin's plan was to invent time travel.

'Tricky?' the professor blurted, flakes of a dolphin tartlet being sieved through his ancient white beard. 'TRICKY!? Lad, parallel parking is tricky, and with that you're only pissing about with two dimensions!' He stood and slammed his hands on the table, giving the cutlery a fright. 'Time travel is four dimensions. FOUR! That's like flying and then some! Get that many axes involved and suddenly you're not just trying to land a big bastard of a plane without any training, you're trying to land a big bastard of a plane on a runway that closed fifteen fucking years ago, WITHOUT ANY TRAINING!' He indicated this by throwing a spoon at a rhinoceros soufflé, missing wildly. Austin was unclear if that was intentional or not. 'You'd have to be fuck-buggeringly mad to even attempt this!'

It was around this point that the heft of Dimitrios's language caused the maître d' to faint, but Austin didn't notice. He was too busy smiling. Austin wasn't mad. No, he was something far, far worse. He was rich. Breathtakingly rich. The sort of rich that takes all the fun out of life. Society simply doesn't know how to adjust to wealth on Austin's scale, trying simply to placate it with luxury yachts, luxury aircraft, luxury cars, and for some reason, hardly ever luxury trains. To put his wealth into context, Austin once fell in love with a quaint English village and decided to live there. You know the type, all maypoles, fêtes, and milkmen. Instead of packing up, forwarding his mail, and all the other hassle that comes with a big move, he instead bought the entire village, moved it two hundred and fifty miles down the road, and plonked it down in his garden. Then, he sold the entire village back to the previous owners at a slight loss, boosting the local economy to such a degree that they built a statue in his honour. He found it unflattering and had it destroyed. Billionaires aren't just rich. They're impossible.

‘How much?’ enquired Austin, wiping his mouth on a sliver of precious mineral.

‘Don’t be an arse,’ Dimitrios scoffed.

‘How much?’ Austin asked again, his tone dropping to ever so slightly above deathly serious.

Dimitrios steadied himself. He leaned in.

‘How much have you got, lad?’

Austin grinned, wrote a cheque for enough money to prop up a one-legged table and slid it over to Dimitrios. Dimitrios looked at it, looked at Austin, looked at it again, and had his third heart attack.

2027

Several years before this, Austin had been living a fairly normal life, nestled deep in the warm bosom of academia. He rented a small, unassuming flat, married a small, unassuming wife, and spent his days in a small, unassuming university laboratory trying to trick the laws of physics into reversing the flow of time. He wasn’t very good at it, but it didn’t matter. The children’s books about a heroic captain that his wife wrote just about kept a roof over their heads.

One night, long after most of the other staff had gone home, a time machine appeared in the exact centre of Austin’s office. It took Austin a moment to notice, preoccupied as he was with a whiteboard full of equations that even he’d forgotten the context of. The pod hovered for a second before crashing to the ground, splintering the hard wood flooring, annihilating one chair, and writing off Austin’s current pair of underpants. After a moment, an old man with sad eyes emerged from the pod.

This man was also Austin Lang. Austin handed Austin a single piece of paper, told him that he’s on the right path, and vanished back into his future, leaving current-day Austin holding a piece of paper containing lottery numbers, the best places to invest large amounts of money over the next few years, and the name ‘Harker’. Weeks later, in the kitchen of their brand-new stately home, Austin’s wife, Natalie, informed him that they were expecting their first child. He suggested the name Harker. Natalie loved it. Before long, one of their spare bedrooms had been painted a pastel pink, an ornate crib had been found, and eventually Austin fell in love with a new woman in his life. One with tiny hands, soft green eyes, and a name from an old man in

the future. When they buried Harker shortly before her sixth birthday, all Austin could think about was something the doctor had said to him on the night his heart broke forever.

'If only we'd found it sooner.'

2068

For a device that could fundamentally alter the entire history *and* future of the human race, Austin's time machine wasn't exactly spectacular. It was a small chrome sphere, about the size of a garden shed, suspended fifty metres above a very, very solid floor. It sat wedged between four vertical metal rails, each one connected to a series of generators so powerful that they made a nuclear bomb look like a lemon with crocodile clips attached. Austin stared at it until he heard a squeak behind him.

'Well, lad, ready to be fucked off back in time?' Dimitrios laughed from his wheelchair, looking less like he was at death's door and more like he'd come via it.

'You have no idea, Dimitrios,' Austin said, a smile cracking through his wrinkled skin. 'I've been waiting for this day for decades.'

'It'll be good to finally close the loop,' nodded Dimitrios, each nod threatening to be his last. 'Have you got the note?'

Austin looked at the piece of paper he was holding. On it were lottery numbers, the best places to invest large amounts of money over the next few years, the name 'Harker', and a warning about her illness.

'Yes,' Austin said, climbing the ladder that led to the machine. 'I have the note.'

To say that Austin Lang's time machine was dangerous would be like saying that the surface of the sun might not be a good place for a waterpark. Not only was the machine a one-tonne sphere hurtling towards the ground, but the sheer amount of energy that it housed was enough to potentially wipe out all life in an eighteen-mile diameter around it. Fortunately for everyone in the local area who enjoyed living, the entire facility was staffed by scientists who had trained their entire lives to prevent that sort of thing. Unfortunately, due to the incredibly tense situation, all of them were one botched mathematical

equation away from a punch-up.

‘If we don’t abort now, the cascade of energy will kill him!’ a professor yelled, hurling a balled up textbook across the room.

‘Nonsense, boy!’ a second professor just three months his senior retorted, furiously scribbling hieroglyphics on a blackboard. ‘Everything is within accepted parameters!’

‘Accepted parameters?! In an experimental field?! Pull the other one!’ another laughed, etching a rude drawing into his workbench.

Sadly, someone did try to pull the other one. Names began to fly, followed by personal insults, light hair pulling, medium face slapping, and before long the promiscuity of each other’s mothers was called into question. Austin’s last three minutes passed without anyone noticing the blaring alarms and flashing red warning lights. The pod dropped. Dimitrios noticed in horror and, with only three and a bit seconds until Austin hit the ground, used the last of his adrenaline to fling himself at the appropriate button. He slammed his fist into it, sent Austin back in time, and inadvertently changed the universe forever.

2027

Austin knew something was wrong the moment he landed in the past. He remembered the first time well. The hovering pod. The landing that wrote off nothing more than an ugly chair, some floorboards, and some personal undergarments. The smile on his older self’s face. None of that happened this time.

The pod crashed hard, punching through several storeys before it came to a rocking halt in the basement, colossal bolts of electricity arcing off it, scorching every surface they touched. Austin kicked the cracked door of the pod open and climbed out, pain ripping across his entire body. He stood, groaned for a while, and gingerly looked up at the hole he’d punched through his former workplace. At the top of this hole, looking down, was himself. Austin waved. Austin waved back.

‘So, you’re really me?’ said Austin, his shaking hands gripping the coffee tightly. ‘From the future?’

‘That’s right,’ said Austin, pouring himself a cup from the machine. ‘About forty years.’

‘Forty years …’ Austin said, staring at his future self. ‘You’ve aged *pretty fucking well*.’

Austin looked at his hands. They were young again, as was the rest of him. The same age as the Austin slightly cowering behind his cup on the staff room sofa. He had no idea why.

‘Side effect of time travel I guess …’ He trailed off, remembering the last time. The future him had been old. ‘I don’t remember the last me changing though.’

‘Last you?’

Austin nodded.

‘This happened before, but it was different. Something must have changed.’ His eye caught the piece of paper on the seat next to the other Austin. His stomach less flipped and more performed an entire aerobatics display, complete with a stumbling dismount.

‘You were me?’ Austin asked. ‘Sitting here?’

‘Not here. It all happened in the office,’ explained Austin. ‘I, well future Austin, he gave me that paper, then he left. I should have left too by now.’

He stared deep into his coffee, the headache rumbling in his skull growing more intense by the second.

‘I should be back in my own time.’

‘Maybe the machine is broken,’ Austin offered, taking a small sip of the still boiling-hot liquid and regretting it immediately. ‘It took quite a beating.’

‘I shouldn’t need the pod to go back,’ Austin said, hopping down from the counter to pace. ‘Its only purpose was to protect me from the initial energy charge. Now that’s done, both the pod and I should snap back, like a rubber band made of temporal energy.’

The two of them sat in silence for a while, both of them working out the answer, neither of them wanting to say it.

‘My timeline doesn’t exist anymore does it?’ Austin said softly. As that thought was processed, he slowly sunk to the floor, the room starting to spin around him. Everything. Everyone. Not just the people he knew, but the entire future of the universe. He’d changed it all, forever. He looked up at his past self, but only saw everything he had just robbed him of.

‘Oh god.’

‘I’m Austin Lang Prime,’ said Austin Lang, ‘and I’m from this timeline.’

‘And I’m Austin Lang Original,’ said Austin Lang, ‘and I’m from a timeline that no longer exists.’

‘I’m Dimitrios,’ said Dimitrios, ‘and you’ll have to repeat all of that.’

The three of them sat in a small greasy spoon café, the sort where you could wring vegetable oil out of the wallpaper without much effort. In one corner, a woman with a light blond ponytail and gold hoop earrings was regaling a man who was inexplicably still wearing his red bicycle helmet with a tale about how she’d gotten herself banned from London Zoo. Austin Lang Prime, annoyed by this distraction on today of all days, decided to wield a piece of fried bread to emphasise his point. ‘Austin over here travelled in time and caused a paradox.’

‘Guilty,’ Austin replied, deflecting the point of the bread with a napkin which almost immediately turned see-through from the grease. ‘But Prime over here is diverging the timelines even more.’

‘Don’t call me Prime,’ said Prime.

‘It’s way easier to understand who we’re talking about,’ replied Austin.

‘It’s really not,’ mumbled Dimitrios.

‘I sound like a fucking delivery option,’ Prime said, watching someone in sunglasses and a hoodie enter the café, take a handful of cutlery from the grey, rounded containers, and bolt out the door. *Fucking London,* he thought.

‘The point is, you’re the only person we know that can put everything back,’ said Austin, ‘and we need your help.’

‘Sorry to interrupt all this Marty McFly shit,’ Dimitrios said, still unable to shake the feeling that this was all some sort of elaborate prank. ‘Why me?’

‘Apparently you built it last time,’ said Prime, spearing a slice of oily tomato.

‘You did,’ nodded Austin. ‘In fact, we built it together.’

‘Son,’ said Dimitrios, taking this as seriously as he dared. ‘I wouldn’t have a clue where to begin. I’ve only ever had a passing glance at temporal mechanics.’

Austin’s mouth fell open. ‘What!?’

‘When did you get my help last time?’ Dimitrios asked.

‘Six years from now,’ Austin said.

‘Well there’s your problem,’ said Dimitrios. ‘You’re too early, my friend. Although, interestingly, I have recently been thinking about taking it up full time—’

Dimitrios was cut off by the shrill, maximum-volume ringing of Prime’s phone. He answered it with shaking hands.

‘Hello? Now? Right, I’m on my way.’

He leapt up while still talking, sending scrambled egg remnants from his lap onto the table opposite. The woman in the ponytail looked livid.

‘I told you it was going to be today,’ Austin said, his voice tailing off as he left the café, almost punching a hole through an old couple near the entrance as he went. ‘I shouldn’t have left. I shouldn’t have listened to you …’

Within a few seconds, the only evidence that he had even been there at all was a slight tinkling of the bell above the door.

‘Where’s he off to?’ Dimitrios asked, reaching over the table to swipe the good bits of meat off Prime’s plate.

‘The happiest day of my life,’ Austin said solemnly. ‘The day my daughter was born.’

‘And you’re not going?’ Dimitrios said, genuine concern in his voice. ‘To witness the birth of my own child again … oh, it was grubby, but I’d give anything—’

‘They had the scan,’ said Austin, sliding Prime’s plate over to Dimitrios. ‘It’s a boy.’

They sat quietly for a moment, Prime’s stolen bacon dripping yolk onto Dimitrios’s plate.

‘Every day this universe diverges more and more,’ said Austin, running his hands through his hair, before suddenly gripping his elbow and wincing. ‘Clumsy fucker …’ he growled through gritted teeth. After a while, the tingling subsided, and he realised that Dimitrios was staring at him quizzically.

‘Funny bone,’ Austin muttered.

‘It’s a nerve actually,’ replied Dimitrios, mopping up some brown sauce. ‘Ulnar.’

‘Delightful,’ said Austin, still rubbing his elbow. ‘That makes it feel better.’

‘Odd,’ Dimitrios said, placing his knife and fork in a cross on top of his empty plate. ‘I didn’t see you bang it off anything.’

‘I didn’t,’ said Austin. He indicated his phone, sitting between them on the table. It had lit up with a message from Prime.

‘Sorry!’

Dimitrios sat back.

‘You share injuries?’

‘Feelings,’ Austin corrected, swiping Prime’s message away. ‘Emotions too. Not the full whack, just an echo of them. It’s like our consciousness doesn’t know which of us is which.’

Dimitrios shook his head.

‘I don’t understand.’

Austin shook his back.

‘Neither do I.’

Austin looked into the eyes of one of his best friends of several decades, and received no familiarity in return. With a sigh he picked up his phone off the table, threw some cash down for the bill, and waved Dimitrios goodbye.

‘What are you going to do?’ Dimitrios asked as Austin turned away from him.

‘I don’t know,’ said Austin without turning back. ‘Restore the timeline any way I can? I owe it to everyone.’

‘And what about this universe?’ Dimitrios asked. ‘These people right here?’

Austin looked around at the people in the café. The old, the young. The singles, the couples. The friends, the families. He left without another word. Dimitrios stared after him for a while before a deep, sinking feeling in his soul manifested as an order for another fried breakfast.

2031

‘Hello!?’ Prime yelled, banging on the door to the hangar. ‘Anyone home?’

‘Just a second,’ a familiar voice echoed from deep within. A moment later the huge, heavy door began to roll upwards, stopping at waist height. Austin poked his head under. He was wearing sunglasses, despite it being night.

‘Quickly, quickly,’ Austin muttered, ushering Prime into the hangar and then closing the door behind them. ‘Were you followed?’

‘I’m a lecturer,’ said Prime. ‘How the fuck would I know?’

‘Fine, that’s fine,’ said Austin, waving Prime further into the dark structure. ‘Come on.’

Prime didn't move.

'It's been three years.'

Austin stopped.

'Huh?'

'Since we last spoke.'

'I've clearly had a lot on,' Austin snapped, returning to his walk.

'Three years!' Prime said, unmoving. 'No replies to my calls. No messages. Nothing.'

'So? You knew I was alive,' Austin shouted back, not stopping.

'Oh yeah, I knew you were alive,' Prime spat angrily. 'Every time you hit your thumb with a hammer, I felt it. Every night you couldn't sleep, neither could I. Every time you missed a meal, I went hungry too, no matter how much I ate to compensate.'

'Sorry,' Austin half-shrugged. 'I've been busy.'

'Too busy to *eat*?!' Prime shouted back. 'What could possibly be so important that—'

Austin turned the lights on. In the centre of the hangar were four vertical rails, each one at least twenty-five metres high and capped off with a small metal sphere at the top. Surrounding this were colossal machines, each glowing a soft blue through a circular window in the centre.

'The time machine …' Prime breathed as Austin savoured his feelings of awe. 'You built it.'

'I improved it,' replied Austin, heading over to the machine. 'Half the height and with twenty-five per cent of the energy consumption. Plus, now it's reusable! Mostly.'

Prime stared at the older version of himself, beaming away. He looked like he hadn't slept in months, and he hadn't.

'No,' said Prime, shaking his head. 'We can't. It's dangerous. Well done and everything, but it's still a no from me.'

He turned to leave, but felt a hand grab him on the shoulder before he got more than a few paces away.

'I fixed it.'

Prime pushed Austin's hand away. 'Fixed what?'

'Time travel,' Austin said, turning back to the machine. 'I made it safe.'

Prime rolled his eyes. 'You can't *fix* the laws of physics.'

'No, but you *can* fix your understanding of them.'

'I don't understand.'

'Allow me to fix that,' Austin smiled.

Soles squeaking, Austin headed over to an old, ratty desk sitting by a bank of computers and pulled out one of its drawers. He walked back, the contents clattering wildly, and upended it on the floor in front of Prime. It was cutlery.

'This is what you brought me here for?' said Prime, an eyebrow raised. 'Spoons?'

'Look at what I'm wearing,' Austin said, throwing the drawer to one side. It fell to bits on landing.

'A hoodie?' shrugged Prime. 'Sunglasses? I don't …'

Prime realised what he was looking at. He remembered the man in the café three years ago. The hood. The sunglasses. The cutlery. *Fucking London.* Prime stepped over to the computer banks, and lowered himself slowly into a chair.

'You'd better take those back,' he said, head in his hands as he tried to re-evaluate his fundamental understanding of the universe.

'Established outcomes,' Austin laughed, frisbeeing his sunglasses away and pulling over a second chair. 'Some events have already happened, they just happened out of order. If you can find one, you can travel there.'

Outside, a siren wailed, passing along the road by the hangar. Prime felt Austin's heartrate accelerate.

'What does this change?' Prime asked, extracting his head from his fingers. 'We can't put things back the way they were.'

'Oh, we can,' said Austin. 'Once you know the rules, you can work out how to break them.'

Austin pulled a file from a heap on the floor and flung its contents over his desk. He began pointing to the near illegible writing.

'My first trip was an established event. I broke that by changing the note about Harker. I think, if we go back with the *original* note, the universe will snap back into this loop and this timeline will just be an anomaly.' Austin pointed to a piece of paper which had the helpful diagram of a crossed out galaxy. 'I think it's worth the risk.'

'Of course you do, Austin,' Prime said, irritated to be having this conversation again. 'You've got nothing to lose here.'

'Prime …'

'Don't *fucking* call me Prime!' he yelled, kicking the chair out from underneath himself as he stood. 'I'll say it again, old man, this is *the* universe. *The* timeline which contains *my* family. You will not take it from me.'

'You're taking this universe from everyone,' spat Austin. 'Think it

through.'

'No,' yelled Prime, jabbing Austin between the ribs with his finger. They both felt it. '*You* did that when *you* changed the past. You got them killed … got them worse than killed. This is the universe now, and you have to make your peace with that.'

Prime's voice echoed around the hangar for a while, eventually being drowned out by a massive aircraft taking off outside.

'You can't stop me,' Austin said quietly. 'I have to put this right.'

Prime took some steps backwards, staring straight at Austin, mouth slightly open. If the roles were reversed, if this was his family that could be saved, could he become this man in front of him?

Prime's foot hit something. A section of piping. He picked it up, feeling the heft of it, and held it up to Austin's face.

'Get out of the way,' he whispered.

Austin glared back at him, both of them already aware of what his answer was going to be.

'No,' Austin replied.

'Fine,' said Prime as he swung the pipe, the painful echo of each blow thudding through his own head.

Austin regained consciousness sometime later. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking as they stung in the acrid, thick air that filled his lab. He turned onto his side, feeling his head stick slightly to the ground with strings of congealing blood. From here, he took in the damage.

His computers had taken the majority of the brunt, each one opened with hard drives shattered beside it. In a corner, belching thick black smoke into the air, was a barrel filled with what Austin assumed to be vital paperwork. He looked over at the time machine to see that Prime had released the pod, shattering it on the ground like a hollow egg. Austin struggled to his feet, reeling from what he assumed was a concussion. As he stood, the room spun severely, causing him to vomit on top of his obliterated phone. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and picked up the only scrap of paper left unburned. It was in his handwriting, but the ink was fresh.

'This is for your own good.'

The hangar door started to roll up, illuminating the floor with alternating red and blue lights. Outside, a man yelled something into a megaphone as several teams of heavily armed police aimed weapons at

the door. They barged in thirty seconds later, but by that point the sole occupant had already fled into the night.

2033

Prime was woken from a fractured sleep by the sound of glass shattering somewhere downstairs.

Natalie mumbled something sleepy and incomprehensible as Prime rolled out of bed silently, her ear plugs preventing her from hearing anything quieter than a nearby train crash. He entered a well-rehearsed code into the keypad of his top drawer and pulled his gun from it with shaking hands. He glanced at Natalie, wondering if he should wake her. No, she'd had a rough day at work and didn't need the paranoia of her husband waking her yet again.

Moving quickly, Prime left the room and descended the curved staircase, placing his bare feet at the far sides of each step to minimise creaking. As he reached the bottom, he noticed light spilling out from underneath the kitchen door to the left. With one hand on the handle, he took a breath, ripped the door open, and pointed the gun square at the face of his own child, a broken glass and a puddle of orange squash at their feet.

'Sorry, Dad.'

Prime threw the gun down onto the counter, wiped his sweating hands off on his pyjamas, and embraced his son, his body hastily transforming adrenaline into relief.

'Hey, little man, what are you doing up?' Prime said, his soft voice ever so slightly catching in his throat.

'I wanted a drink,' Oliver said, barely holding back tears from the fright.

Prime smiled and picked his son up, placing him down on the nearby sofa, away from the broken glass.

'What's our night-time rule?' Prime asked, crouching next to him.

'Get you if I need anything.' Oliver sniffed, his eyes locked to the ground.

'This is why we have rules OK?' Prime said, kissing him on the head. 'I don't want you to get hurt.'

'I know …'

Prime ruffled his hair.

'Come on, let's clean up and get you back to bed.'

‘But you said it was OK,’ Oliver mumbled.

‘I don’t think I did,’ Prime chuckled, searching the cupboards for a dustpan and brush. ‘And don’t tell me Mummy said it was OK either because I’ll—’

He froze.

‘When did I say that?’ Prime whispered.

‘Just now,’ said Oliver. Prime felt a cold, primal fear flutter across his heart. He tried to suppress it, to keep it hidden, but it was too late. A twist of someone else’s excitement ran across his body.

They’d been found.

‘Where?’

‘In my room.’

‘Car, now,’ he said, sliding the keys from the side table into his son’s hands. ‘Like we practised.’

Oliver nodded and scurried away as Prime snatched his gun from the counter, double-checked that it was loaded, and headed back upstairs. This was his house. He knew the layout. He had the advantage. Upstairs there were four rooms. A bathroom to the right, with his bedroom opposite. Then, two doors straight ahead. His office, and his son’s room, the only door to be sitting ajar. Briefly, he thought about peppering his son’s room with bullets, but he didn’t want Nat waking up until he knew she was safe from Austin.

Prime caught the movement in his periphery too late. Austin lunged from the darkness, tackling him and sending them both hurtling down the stairs. Fists flew, bruising flesh and denting plasterboard. The gun clattered to the ground, sliding across the stone floor towards the kitchen. Prime scampered after it, suddenly having the wind knocked out of him as Austin leapt onto him, scratching as his fingers stretched for the weapon, closer and closer.

Suddenly, Prime felt a hand grip the back of his head. He didn’t have time to react as Austin drove it into the floor repeatedly, each dull thud accompanied by an anguished gasp. Happy his opponent was down, Austin stood, dusted himself off, and picked up the weapon.

‘I wonder,’ he said, pointing the gun up towards the ceiling and slowly waving it back and forth. Prime watched, his heart racing as it passed over the spot where his sleeping wife was lying upstairs, revealing her location.

‘Don’t,’ Prime pleaded from the floor. ‘I’ll do anything.’

Austin fired, emptying almost the entire clip into the ceiling. Plaster rained down, exposing the base of a bed, the mattress above it torn to

shreds, and a dark red stain that gradually seeped across it. Austin glanced up to admire his handiwork.

'Now you'll do anything,' he said, turning back just in time to see Prime leap at him, throwing him to the ground, his back landing on shards of glass he hadn't spotted. A searing echo of pain shot through Prime's body as he watched Austin squirm. He stepped forward, ready to finish him off, before turning and running as fast as he could.

Seconds later, he was outside, his cold hands fumbling with the handle of his car as stones from the driveway dug into his feet. He cannoned himself into the car, clocked Oliver in the back seat, and threw the ignition on. As he turned to gun it down the road, he noticed a car he'd never seen before, parked opposite.

'Where's Mummy?' Oliver asked, watching the world whoosh by, the white LED lights overhead adding a ghostly hue to the journey.

Prime didn't answer his son. With a screech of tyres that sent Oliver sliding and giggling across the back seat, his seatbelt clearly undone, Prime took a hard left, peeling down one of the country roads that exited the small village they'd called home for the past few months. How had Austin found them? They'd been so careful, moving from house to house, never settling for too long. For fuck's sake, they'd been living out of suitcases for almost two years now. Prime blinked the tears from his eyes, focusing on the road.

Lights flashed up ahead. Red, alternating. A bell pierced through the night air. Prime hit the brakes, stopping just before the red and white striped barriers that sat across both sides of the road.

There can't be any trains, not now, he thought, leaning forward to try and see down the line. *I should risk it.*

Lights suddenly flashed across his rear-view mirror. Prime glanced up, too late to do anything. 'SHIT!'

The cars collided, sending Prime's rolling over into the track, metal cutting into him as his airbag deployed slightly too late, catapulting shards of dashboard directly into his face and chest. After a few moments of terrible noise, everything was silent, save for the click of his emergency lights, the metallic creak of a dying engine, and the footsteps approaching his car. Prime's door opened, pushing ballast out of the way. A hand reached in, grabbed him roughly around the pyjama collar, and pulled him out, through the broken glass that littered the floor. As it started to haul him away, Prime spotted Oliver, unmoving, still in the car. He couldn't tell if he was breathing.

'Please …' Prime coughed, winded, blood coating the inside of his

throat. ‘Oliver …’

Austin propped Prime up against a tree and knelt down, inches from his face.

‘How many times did I beg you to save my daughter, *our* daughter, and all you ever said was “no”?’ Austin growled, blood pouring from his own face.

‘Please …’ Prime whispered. In the distance, the two men heard the rumble of a train. Austin pressed his forehead into Prime’s, staring directly into his own eyes.

‘No.’

Prime stared back, looking for a flicker of remorse, a single morsel of regret. All he felt was loathing.

‘Why do you hate him?’ Prime coughed, blood folding over his lip. ‘He’s just a boy.’

‘He’s the manifestation of a broken timeline,’ spat Austin. ‘He has to die.’

Prime weakly tried to climb to his feet. Austin didn’t have to exert much energy to press him back against the tree.

‘Why?’ Prime sobbed. ‘I promise I’ll help you, just let him live.’

‘Because,’ Austin said calmly. ‘In thirty seconds you’ll feel like I do. Then you’ll do anything you can to help me make this right.’

Far too close, a train horn blared. With a matching roar, Prime pooled everything he had left into a punch. It caught Austin by surprise, knocking him back, his head hitting off a rock as he fell. Prime staggered to his feet, the pain from his haymaker reverberating through his own head, and hobbled as fast as he could over to his upturned vehicle, his body coming apart at the seams. Lights started to reflect off the car, and suddenly the world filled with the blare of a horn and the scream of emergency brakes. Metal on metal.

Prime got to the car, practically falling onto it, and began to tug at the back door, its frame digging deeper into the ballast with each pull. As the bright lights and noise got closer, he began to kick the window, screaming in desperation, until a gunshot to his torso took him off balance, sending him falling backwards as the train shot past, taking his car and son with it.

As Prime’s vision faded, along with his breathing, he spotted Austin standing over him, laughing through blood.

‘Come on then,’ smiled Austin, his voice echoing and swirling. ‘Lots to do.’

Prime looked up, into his own, unrecognisable eyes, and experienced

the joy of Austin Lang's victory. It crept around inside of him, slithering coldly around the fragments of his own, broken heart. With the very last of his energy, Prime tried to die out of spite.

2034

Prime woke up in the same way he always did, as a knackered old A380 fired up its four engines, starting it on its 5 a.m. journey out of London and towards Lisbon. He sat up, kicked the tatty old duvet off himself, and struggled to his feet, stepping off the mattress and onto the cold floor, the shackle locked around his ankle cutting into the usual places as the chain it was attached to became taut. He leaned forward, picked up his handcuffs, put them on using a small metal table as a support, and waited.

'Morning,' said Austin, coming over from the other side of the hangar. 'Sleep well?'

Prime didn't say anything. He hadn't said much this past year.

Austin slouched over, coffee in hand, and checked that Prime was secure in his handcuffs. Satisfied, he brought over a longer chain, connected it to the shackle, locked it into place, and removed Prime's night-time chain. With a click of the device in his pocket, a small, test spark of electricity shot through it, causing Prime's leg to briefly tense up. Satisfied it was working, Austin gave Prime a thumbs up. 'Big day!' he beamed, walking away as Prime followed, his chain snaking along behind them. 'I couldn't have done it without you, even with your tendency to thread every screw you come across.'

Prime ignored the barb and looked up at the newest time machine; the pod for it was already raised up to the apex. In a few short hours, that pod would drop, wiping out this universe and everyone in it, making it so they never existed. The only way to lose this pain.

With a few clicks, Austin ignited the gas under the stove, bringing a frying pan up to heat. Before long, bacon was sizzling, and a small pot of beans was gently bubbling next to it.

'I made you our favourite,' Austin said, placing the plate in front of Prime. 'Full English. Well, half of a full English.'

Austin smiled. Prime didn't return the gesture, instead choosing to shovel the food into his mouth as quickly as possible with the plastic fork provided.

Austin sat himself at the other end of the table, a slightly less neatly served plate of food already laid out for himself. 'Do you remember,' he said, forgoing beans for a desperate grasp at conversation, 'that

time we took Natalie's parents to that fancy restaurant?'

Prime kept shovelling.

'Her dad ordered those oysters, and he didn't have a clue what to do with them.'

Austin chuckled at the memory. Prime glared.

'So he gets the shucking knife, jabs it into the top, and before we can stop him, he presses *hard*. So hard that—'

'You know he had to go to hospital, right?' Prime interrupted. 'Eight stitches.'

Austin shrugged, slightly annoyed that his story had been interrupted. 'Still funny.'

Prime threw his cutlery down, hoping for a dramatic crash but only getting the quiet tap of a plastic fork hitting a plastic tablecloth.

'No, it's not,' he said. 'I've literally never laughed about that. Ever.'

'Oh come on,' Austin said, 'I know I have.'

'Maybe you have,' Prime said, pushing his plate away. 'Not me.'

Austin smiled that fucking smile again. Prime clenched a fist, hoping that he had never looked this punchable in his life.

'We're the same person, Prime,' said Austin. 'No matter how much you don't want us to be.'

'Well I, for one, am not a psychopath!' Prime yelled back, the sentence echoing around the hangar, as if even the walls agreed with him.

'I'm not a psychopath,' Austin replied, his tone dropping considerably. 'I'm saving the universe.'

Prime rattled his chains at Austin.

'Casualty of war,' Austin said, waving the idea away. 'If you only understood what I'm trying to do here.'

'Oh fuck off—' Prime began, before every muscle in his body tightened, tens of thousands of volts ripping through him. He fell from his chair, landing on the hard concrete floor with a thud. Austin kept his finger on the button a little longer, enjoying the pain Prime was in just enough to suffer through the echo of it himself.

Finally, the electricity relented, and Prime's body was returned to him. He curled up in agony, the frayed edges of his clothes smoking slightly as loose threads burned. 'You're right,' he said quietly. 'How could I possibly think you're a psychopath.'

Austin stood and quietly began to clear the table. He piled the two plates on top of each other, softly mashing uneaten beans onto the bottom of one, and placed them in the sink, resisting the urge to send

them hurtling across the hangar.

'I'm doing this for your family, you ungrateful piece of shit.'

Austin turned on the water, squirting a small amount of washing-up liquid into the bowl, and watched as bubbles formed delicate mounds on the surface. On the floor, Prime started to laugh. It wasn't a good laugh.

'Oh,' Prime said, his voice hoarser than before. 'Did I not thank you? How selfish of me.' With an unintended groan, Prime pulled himself up onto an elbow to stare directly into Austin's face.

'Thank you, Austin,' Prime whispered as loudly as he could. 'Thank you for killing my wife and child.'

The plates went sailing across the hangar.

'This is the only way to save them both!' Austin yelled.

'Yeah, and whose fault is that?'

The table joined the plates across the hangar, followed by a couple of pots and a handful of cutlery. After a short while leaning over a tatty old countertop, Austin regained his composure.

'Mine,' said Austin. 'It's my fault.'

He stood again and walked over to Prime.

'I'm about to wipe myself from existence to put the universe right,' he said, tears in his eyes. 'I'm not just going to give my life, I'm going to give my death.'

'Our life,' said Prime. 'Our death.'

Austin looked down at Prime. 'Would you die for them?' he asked.

'I tried to,' Prime spat back.

Austin held out a hand, motioning Prime to take it.

'Try again,' he said softly. 'For Natalie.'

Prime looked up at Austin, feeling the look in his eyes.

'For Natalie,' he replied, taking Austin's hand.

'NOW!' Austin shouted across the hangar, causing Prime to heave all of his weight against the massive lever bolted into the floor. The lights flickered on and off as they stopped drawing power from the grid and started drawing it from Austin's almighty generators, each one far, far more radioactive than even he had calculated.

Prime picked up his chain so he could run slightly faster, back to the central control panel where Austin was standing.

'Power?' he asked, arriving and dumping his chain onto the floor in

a heap.

'Looking good,' Austin said. 'The generators are showing no signs of issues.'

'So …' said Prime, 'we're ready?'

'We're ready,' said Austin.

Prime held his hand out for Austin to shake.

'Good luck, Austin.'

Austin smiled, pushed Prime's hand aside, and embraced him like a brother. 'Thank *you*,' he said, hugging him tightly.

After breaking apart, Austin triple-checked the destination on the terminal, took a steadying breath, and turned towards his time machine for the final time. He closed his eyes, listening to the deepening rumble of the engines as they force-fed nearby custom-built capacitors with ludicrous amounts of energy. He reached into his mind for kind memories, nice ones to go out on, but found that they were still tainted by that night. He tried to shake it off, internally arguing that it wasn't his Natalie that he … Besides, it was time to undo these mistakes. These necessary mistakes.

Behind him, Prime felt Austin's concentration lapse. He cleared his mind, like he had been practising since the day he'd lost everything, and made his move. The thin end of a clipboard came crashing into the side of Austin's neck, triggering his gag reflex and sending pain shooting across his spine. A kick to the back sent him sprawling forwards, bouncing off the scaffolding, but just about staying on his feet. He glanced back with enough time to see Prime, his face twisted with rage, throwing his entire body at him as he tackled him onto the ground. Austin scrambled, flipping onto his front and trying to stand, before feeling something hard tighten around his neck. Prime fell onto him, pressed his knees into his back, and pulled his arms as hard as he could, putting all of his body weight through his chain, watching it dig into Austin's skin, a year of planning paying off.

'Prime …' Austin croaked, his fingers scratching at the handcuffs in vain.

'I'm stopping this,' said Prime through gritted teeth, feeling the pain but, unlike Austin, still able to breathe. 'Stopping you.'

Austin gurgled in disagreement.

'Goodbye, Austin,' Prime said, tightening the chain one last time as Austin's eyes started to roll back in his head, blood dripping onto the floor from his throat. As he gurgled away, a bell trilled, indicating that the time machine was ready. With a grunt, Prime ripped his chain out

of Austin's neck, each link making a small, wet pop as it dislodged. He stood, breathing heavily, and watched Austin for a while as blood slowly pooled on the floor under him.

Satisfied, Prime patted down Austin's pockets, extracting and using the key to his shackles. He turned and ran to the control panels on the ground floor, looking for the abort controller.

Shit, he thought as he sped through menus. *Can't stop it from here.* He glanced up at the pod, electricity sparking across its exterior, and remembered a schematic. Inside the pod there was a single removable link in case of emergencies. It would disconnect the pod from the machine, rendering it useless.

The countdown flashed sixty seconds left.

Prime began climbing up the scaffolding that supported the time machine. At the top, a scrawl on the pod caught his eye, clearly added by Austin this morning.

'For Harker'.

Prime bit his tongue, hoping that somewhere in hell, Austin could still feel it.

'For Natalie,' he said, heaving himself into the pod. 'For Oliver.'

Inside, he knelt on the single seat and pulled the required panel away from the wall, exposing the inner circuitry. Thirty seconds left.

With a thud, the door to the pod slammed shut, trapping him inside. Prime spun around and realised in horror that Austin had steadily dragged his bleeding body to the control panel and was now waving him adieu.

Fifteen seconds left. Prime spun back around, fiddling among the wires for the link. Instead, he withdrew a piece of paper. A note to his past self he'd seen once before. Instructions, and the name 'Harker'.

This was Austin's final trap. The moment Prime landed in the past, he'd be responsible for the new universe, keeping it on track. If he didn't, he would become everything he hated. Austin had left him no choice. He had won.

Fuck that, thought Prime.

With five seconds left, Prime shoved his hand into the pod's innards, gripped as many wires as he could, and pulled. Coated wires and sparks followed his hand out as red warning lights lit up Austin's face the exact moment his smile fell.

The time machine roared, draining the reactors as it tore through a colossal amount of energy. The pod dropped, Prime vanished into God knows where, and Austin flipped him off as he fell.

Silence descended on the hangar, with the exception of the odd spark of electricity and a few pieces of paper billowing about. Austin touched his neck gingerly, pain shooting through almost every nerve as he moved. He got to his feet proper, and decided that now would be a really good time to try out that medical kit he had lying around somewhere. That's when the first reactor burst into flames.

Prime's final act of rebellion had caused several of the capacitors to blow. Now there wasn't enough energy left to allow the pod and occupant to return safely. It would still return, it just wouldn't do it safely.

Austin considered his limited options. Upon landing, energy from the machine would cascade, temporal feedback would build up, and eventually the huge experimental reactors behind Austin would detonate. If he wished to survive, he worked out that he should retreat to a safe distance of around twenty miles, or forty if he was adamant he wanted to stand next to a window at the time of the detonation.

With a deep rumble, a rift formed between the pylons of the time machine and the pod came crashing back to Earth. It shattered the ground, sending sharp shards of concrete in every direction. Austin would have counted how many hit him, but after a while the piercing pains all blended into one.

As the reactors began to glow white hot, Austin staggered over to the pod, very aware that he had only a handful of heartbeats left, and fewer breaths than that. He wrapped a bloodied hand around the release lever, and tugged, causing the door to fall forwards, crashing to the floor with a bang.

'Still alive?' he asked Prime. Prime shook his head, causing more blood to pour out of the huge hole in his chest. A jagged part of the pod had come away on landing and was now protruding unfashionably through his chest.

Austin's heart coughed, causing him to collapse onto the pod, sliding down until he was sitting in its doorway, his head coming to a rest against Prime's leg.

'We've … got … to stop … doing this,' Prime said slowly, each syllable moving his chest against the serrated edge of the metal, cutting him deeper.

'We will,' said Austin, trying and failing to raise a hand to point at the critical warning signs lighting up his monitors. 'Cascade. It's about to explode.'

'Oh …' said Prime, deciding to spend these last few seconds thinking

about his family. He wasn't a big believer in any sort of afterlife, but he decided that, on balance, he quite hoped he was wrong.

'Where did you end up?' sputtered Austin.

'Millions of years … past … I think,' replied Prime. 'Met some nice people, even if it was a bit … fuzzy.'

The first reactor began to melt the floor where it stood, filling the hangar with smoke.

'Prime?' asked Austin.

Prime didn't reply. He was likely gone.

'I'm … sorry,' breathed Austin, his vision blurring, his heart slowing. 'I just … wanted to save them.'

On the other side of the hangar, the first engine went critical, kicking off the temporal cascade. Austin looked up at his alternate self as his time machine exploded, wiping out all life in a twenty-mile radius.

The first breath that filled Austin's lungs stung, both on the way in and the way out. It was ice cold and fresh, matching the wind that lightly played across his face. He opened his eyes to see the sky. It was blue. A beautiful, brilliant blue. Something was missing though, apart from the roof, something big and loud and important and …

Pain. The pain had stopped.

He sat up, one hand supporting the movement, the other running over his neck. Nothing. No wound. No blood. In a panic, his hands ran down to his chest, but that was fine too. Of course that was fine, that was Prime's wound.

Wasn't it?

It was night. The moon hung low in the sky, its warm, orange glow through the dust highlighting the rubble that lay strewn around him. Prime got to his feet, eyes stinging from the blinding sun, and looked around him. In every direction, for as far as his eyes could see, the world lay in ruin. Everything ash and grey.

It was raining. A man in a high-visibility coat was approaching Austin slowly, a torch in one hand, a walkie talkie in the other. Prime's clothes started to get wet in the storm that had been rolling over what was left of London for hours. The man was in front of Austin.

'Sir, are you—'

The man started to flicker, along with the rest of the universe, like

the sun was a strobe light. Prime looked down and realised that there was a corpse at his feet. Austin Lang was dead. No. Prime was dead. He was Austin. He remembered building the machine. The original timeline. Fleeing from Austin that night. He remembered it all. He was Prime. Wait. No.

The man in the high-visibility coat called for backup on his walkie talkie, but it didn't matter. Nobody in the universe could help anymore. He and Prime existed and didn't at the same time, both living, both dead, both here, both not, all at the same time.

As Austin collapsed to the ground, his mind collapsed with him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Abyssinia

NULL ISLAND | 2034

Stay with me, sweetie, not long now.

Kez lay against the buoy, the relentless motion making it difficult to apply pressure to the bullet wound in her side. Another wave crashed against her, causing Austin's baggy clothes to cling tightly to her skin. She looked down at the beacon clutched tightly to her chest, water somehow stuck inside its display, as it slowly ticked down the seconds until she was back home. Three minutes now. She could survive three minutes. She had to. She knew Austin Lang's secret. Millions of years ago, she'd found a screw, twice. This screw, a part of the time machine in the events that Austin had just described to her, was fractured across destinies, existing in both a destroyed and fixed state at once. Only when under conscious observation could it be seen.

Austin Lang was the same. There were two of him, one alive, one dead. Here, she observed the living one, keeping him alive. The only way to kill Austin Lang was to observe his dead body, wherever that was. Find the body, kill Austin Lang. End this.

Then there were the birds. Sentient life, observing him, keeping him here, alive. If unobserved, he'd fall through the cracks in the universe where physics met consciousness, returning only when seen again.

That would explain the cameras, streaming his life for the past week. A scientist running an experiment, seeing if digital observation counted. An experiment that failed, no matter how many viewers his bombings managed to attract. Whoever Austin was, he'd have to be watched at all times, directly, by another sentient lifeform.

Another wave collided with her, forcing more salt water into her respiratory system. She coughed, intense pain dispersing from the wound across her body as another wave swept the beacon from her hands.

'NO!' Kez sputtered, watching as it floated away from her, slowly falling beneath the surface as each wave passed over it.

Kez fidgeted, using the pain in her side to keep her focused. There was one more secret she knew, one more piece of information to report

before she could even think about dying. She had to make it home. She knew who the mole was.

With two minutes left, Kez took a deep breath, pressed one hand into her side tightly, and dived into the ocean.

LUCAS | 2783

Theo, Iscah, and Eureka watched as a colossal hunk of surface rock fell past the great window in the temporal command centre, slowing down as it headed towards the near infinite crushing force at the centre of the black hole. Its back section clipped one of the support pylons, causing the entire station to shake violently.

'Oh, that bit looked nice,' said Iscah, picking herself up off the floor. 'Imagine a small house at the top of that cliff. Coastal views, lovely.'

'Dodgy neighbour though,' said Theo, his eyes locked onto the time machine's readings. 'You kick a ball over the fence into a black hole's garden and you're never getting it back.'

'Arguably, it would never reach the garden,' mumbled Malcolm as he whizzed by, speeding from one technological disaster to the next.

'Nobody cares, nerd,' Morag scoffed, turning her attention back to her hand of cards. 'Do you have any twos?'

'We're playing poker, Morag,' sighed Bea, raising her bet by nudging spare bolts across the table. 'Turn that other brain of yours on, I want real competition.'

'Blair is sleeping,' Morag said, wondering if the two letter 'A's she was holding were any good. 'She'd been active for too long and was turning into a right grump.'

'Your other brain has a different name?' Bea asked, confused. 'I thought you were both the same person.'

'We are,' nodded Morag, folding. 'We're both Morag, but she's Blair too.'

Bea looked at Morag for a moment, wondering if she was witnessing the start of a civil war.

Malcolm shot past again, his energy wake hoovering up the majority of Bea's winnings, some of which he needed for repairs, the rest because he was a devious little scamp.

'Oi!' she yelled after him. 'You owe me four million money now!'

The station violently shook as another fragment of the planet crashed into its shields, upending the entire game of cards and most of

the crew.

'Hey, you did have twos!' Morag said, pointing at the fallen cards. Alphonse entered the command centre, a strong smell of garlic following him in.

'How long left?' he asked, sitting down beside Theo.

'Any minute now,' Theo reported, jabbing his index finger at raw data.

'Planetfall?' Eureka asked, gazing out at Ipricus, now close enough to see details of its terrain. If it had trees, she'd almost be able to count the leaves.

'Any minute now,' Theo repeated grimly. 'The engines are really struggling to resist the planet's gravity.'

Eureka nodded to herself, biting her tongue as best as she could. Minutes. That's all the time she had to be able to go home, and she was pretty sure nobody in the room even remembered. She folded her arms, pressing the flat side of the knife she'd liberated from the past into her body. If it came to it, if there was no other way, she'd have to —

'Incoming!' exclaimed Theo, as the space inside the time machine folded inside out, spitting out Kez and thirty cubic metres of water. Both hit the ground hard.

'Something's wrong,' Bea said, as behind her Malcolm wrapped his form around a lever and pulled, flipping the time machine's output, holding back Ipricus once more. 'She's not moving.'

'Pull her out of there, Malcolm,' said Morag. 'I don't trust that much water with that much power.'

Malcolm threw himself back and forth across the room, like a table-tennis match being fast forwarded, until Kez was transported to the floor in front of Morag.

'Kez?' asked Morag, kneeling next to her. 'You still with us?'

Kez didn't reply. Her eyes were closed, her head lolling to one side. Morag tilted Kez's head back, using a second hand to lift her chin, opening up Kez's airway. She leaned forward, holding a third arm in front of Kez's mouth. It's cold steel surface fogged up. She was breathing.

A quick pass of Kez drew Morag's eye to a large bloodstain on the side of her clothing. With a flash of metal arms, the area was cut, cleaned, and inspected. Nanobots crawled into the wound, where some broke down a bullet and pulled out the fragments while the rest began disinfecting and stitching.

‘She’s lost a lot of blood and breathed in a lot of salt water,’ Morag said, pulling a large needle out of her emergency medical bag and injecting it into Kez’s neck. ‘Now, stand back. This won’t be pretty.’

Not pretty was an understatement. Kez’s entire body arched, as if it was being picked up at the waist and squeezed by a giant hand. Moments later, Kez coughed up all the misplaced water inside her body, as well as most of the contents of her stomach. She convulsed one last time, before falling back to the ground.

‘She’ll be back with us in a minute,’ said Morag, wiping Kez’s mouth with a spare bandage. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

‘Then, can I go home?’ Eureka asked quietly.

Slowly, the group turned from their crewmate who had risked her life to save them to the one who wanted to abandon them. Alphonse stepped over to Eureka, his hulking form almost taking up her entire view, like Ipricus above. ‘Of course,’ he smiled kindly, offering his hand. ‘May I just say, on behalf of everyone here, that it’s been an honour to work with you.’

‘Beyond an honour,’ said Theo. ‘It’s been magnificent.’

‘Unbelievable,’ added Iscah. ‘As in, nobody I talk to will ever believe it.’

Eureka breathed a sigh of relief and shook Alphonse’s hand. Finally, after all this time she’d—

‘No,’ sighed Malcolm, pointing at a nearby monitor. ‘I am sorry, but I cannot let that happen.’

‘Malcolm …’ began Alphonse.

‘The time machine is no longer fully holding back Ipricus,’ Malcolm said. ‘It is slowing it, but we now have less than an hour before it destroys this station.’

‘Can you fix it?’ Alphonse asked.

Malcolm shook himself.

‘No. The damage to the time machine is now too extensive. It was never designed to run this long.’

Alphonse’s shoulders fell, the consequence of either choice weighing him down physically. ‘Yeah, OK, Eureka,’ Alphonse nodded slowly. ‘You can go home.’

‘You misunderstand me,’ said Malcolm, his form spiking. ‘If we use the machine one more time, we will not be able to stop a collision with Ipricus.’

‘Oh, I don’t misunderstand you,’ Alphonse said calmly. ‘But in this situation, with our limited power, either one of us survives, or none of

us do.'

Eureka bit her tongue. This wasn't true. She'd had an idea for a while now on how to escape Ipricus. It would save everyone, but it would strand her here. She'd never see Lily again.

'Should I prepare Eureka's destination?' Malcolm asked.

Internally, Eureka begged someone to realise the solution. She didn't want to make this call. She wanted it taken from her.

'Thoughts?' Alphonse asked his crew.

'Seems logical,' nodded Bea.

'Not a bad way to go,' shrugged Iscah. 'We'll sit somewhere comfy, have a drink, and wait for a big rock to twat us.'

'Ugh,' groaned Theo sarcastically. 'Again?'

Eureka let out an anguished yell. Her fist flew at a nearby panel, buckling it severely. 'I think I know a way off this station,' Eureka said bitterly, nursing her own hand. 'The habitable section of *Lucas* used to be a starship, correct? We could cut it loose and fly it out of here.'

Eureka's words echoed around the command centre. By the time they'd returned, all eyes were on Malcolm.

'Theoretically possible,' he said, curling up into his thinking position. 'However, the time machine would immediately fall into the black hole. Eureka, it would become impossible to send you—'

Kez sat bolt upright, a panicked look on her face as she glanced wildly around the room. 'Where … ?' she asked, before gripping her head tightly as an intense pain shot through it. For a moment she thought she heard E-NA screaming something, but she couldn't make out her words over the ringing in her ears.

As suddenly as it started, the pain stopped. Reluctantly, Kez withdrew her hands from her head, squinting to be on the safe side.

'How are you feeling?' Morag asked, checking her vitals.

Kez ignored her, instead scanning the room for her target. With him spotted, she pointed hard, almost throwing herself off balance.

'You!' she spat.

'Me?' Malcolm asked.

'I pressed your button,' Kez coughed, indicating the emergency escape control dangling from the dripping wet beacon next to her. 'Where did you say it would take me again?'

'The Antipodes Islands,' Malcolm said. 'Geographically, it is the point on Earth which was furthest away from Austin Lang, giving you the maximum time to—'

'DO I LOOK LIKE I ENDED UP ON LAND?' Kez yelled, throwing her

hands up into the air and allowing water to fling itself off her sodden clothing. 'YOU SENT ME TO THE MIDDLE OF THE SODDING OCEAN!'

Malcolm, confused, nipped over to the beacon, touched it, and ran a quick diagnostic. 'The destination value must have been reset to zero degrees latitude and zero degrees longitude,' he said. 'My mistake.'

'Your mistake!?' Kez exclaimed. 'If it wasn't for the buoy out there, I would have drowned!'

'I am glad you did not,' Malcolm said.

'Thank you,' Kez chuckled, pulling herself to her feet. 'I'm glad I've managed to add drowning to the list of awful shit that's happened to me the past few days.'

'Kez …' began Alphonse before Kez nodded, knowing what he was going to ask.

'I know everything,' she said. 'Including the … extra thing we talked about.'

'You mean … ?'

'Yeah,' said Kez, pointing to Theo. 'There's your damn mole.'

The room shook as another fragment of Ipricus slowly grated its way across *Lucas*'s shields.

'What was that?' Theo chuckled nervously.

Malcolm suddenly lurched forward, spiralling round Theo, using his own body as a restraint.

'Are you sure?' Alphonse asked, beckoning for Eureka and Iscah to step away from Theo.

'Damn sure,' said Kez. 'He started this. All of it.'

'Oh, a witch hunt!' clapped Iscah sarcastically, a bitter look on her face. 'Love these.'

'Scared of witches?' asked Alphonse.

'No,' said Iscah firmly. 'I'm scared of the people who used fear as an excuse to burn innocent women.'

'This is no hunt,' said Kez. 'He sold us all out and I have proof.'

'Kez, I don't know what you're talking about,' Theo said calmly and slowly, recognising the weight of the situation. 'What do you think I've done?'

'You handed me a dataflake,' Kez said. 'In the bathroom before the last mission. You said it was from Alphonse.'

'I never gave him a dataflake,' growled Alphonse.

'I figured,' nodded Kez.

'Two things,' said Theo, still impeccably calm. 'One, I never handed you a dataflake.'

‘There was one on the sink next to Kez when we turned up,’ nodded Iscah. ‘I didn’t see it on her before.’

‘Same,’ said Eureka darkly, anger and confusion plastered over her face.

‘OK, we’ll come back to that,’ said Theo. ‘Two. I don’t understand how handing you a dataflake makes me a traitor.’

‘I must admit, some clarity on this point would be nice,’ said Alphonse.

‘Because,’ growled Kez, ‘it wasn’t who *you* handed it to. It was who *I* handed it to.’

CHIPPENHAM, ENGLAND | 2034

As Austin finished his tale, Kez got to her feet, kicking herself mentally for closing the door when she arrived.

‘You’re a monster,’ she gasped.

‘Half of me is, yeah,’ Austin muttered, his eyes staring off, unfocused, far away. ‘The other half, my Prime half, oh, he’s *infuriating*.’

Slowly, Kez took a step backwards, towards the only exit.

‘How so?’ she asked, trying to divert attention away from her movements.

‘I’ll give you an example,’ Austin said, spinning around and taking his gun from the sink. He pointed it at Kez, lined up a shot and fired. Kez felt chips of the wall behind her scatter themselves over her back.

‘See?’ Austin chuckled. ‘I was aiming for your head.’

With a flick of his wrist he indicated that he’d really enjoy it if Kez returned to the sofa, which she did. Austin hopped up onto the counter opposite, the smoking gun still in his hand.

‘I have some questions if you don’t mind answering them, and some bullets if you do,’ Austin said, tapping his gun on the counter. ‘When exactly are you from?’

‘2783,’ Kez said. ‘I grew up on a space station.’

‘Didn’t need the where, even if it was cool,’ Austin smiled. ‘Why are you here?’

‘You told me to kill you,’ Kez said quickly.

‘Ah, so I did,’ Austin sighed, remembering. ‘I told you Prime was irritating. Next question, how did you know he would be there, millions of years in the past?’

‘Fragments of our conversation were broadcast by your dying time machine,’ Kez said. ‘They were picked up, and I was sent to investigate them.’

‘That makes sense,’ he replied. ‘Next. Who’s Harker to you?’

Kez swallowed hard. She didn’t want to answer this one.

‘My mum,’ she said softly. ‘One of the sections of time machine we recovered had her name on it. I thought you were involved in her disappearance, but … I was wrong.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Austin said, before rolling his eyes at his own words and mouthing ‘irritating’.

A high-pitched beep filled the air, causing Austin to tilt his head at Kez, like a confused Yap.

‘Pockets?’ he asked. Kez nodded. ‘Empty them.’

Kez did as she was told, unloading the beacon, the stolen screwdriver, and the dataflake that Theo had given her onto the sofa. Austin walked over and picked up each one in turn. First, the beacon, which he threw back onto the sofa. Second, the screwdriver, which he chuckled at, pointing out the ‘A.L.’ initials etched onto the side. Third, the dataflake, his eyes lighting up as he processed what he was seeing.

‘This is incredible,’ he said, hunched over the dataflake. ‘It’s so … thin.’

Austin tapped at the screen, delighted to feel how tactile and responsive it was, before his eyes clearly fell onto something interesting. He held the dataflake up to Kez, indicating his finding with his index finger. Kez leaned forward and read the title of a file she didn’t know was there.

‘Read me Austin’

‘I don’t know what that is,’ Kez said, stunned.

‘Let’s find out then,’ Austin smiled, double tapping the icon.

Something flashed across the screen, lighting up Austin’s face with a ghostly glow. He flicked through it rapidly, absorbing whatever was being displayed. By the end, he was breathing heavily. ‘This is … everything,’ he said. ‘All of it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Kez said, trying to sneak a view without moving. ‘What is it?’

Austin spun the device around to Kez, showing her a heading with today’s date on it. News, updates, financial charts; it was an entire report from this day in 2034, including events that hadn’t happened yet. Austin scrolled further, revealing news from other worlds, ones that Earth was yet to make contact with. Then, at the bottom of it all,

something that terrified Kez to her core.

A transcript. A transcript of the very conversation she was currently having.

Austin turned the device back to himself, scrolling further down the page, his eyes flashing with glee as he read on. He knew how this moment was going to continue. He knew how it was going to end.

Austin flicked forward rapidly, delight hardening around his face.

'"We'll pull you back after two hours",' he read, swapping voices for each new speaker. '"If you are in danger, just hit that button. *It'll pull me back early?* No. It'll just teleport you to the other side of the planet where you can wait out the remaining time. *Good luck, Kez.* Whatever happens next, thank you."'

'I remember that,' breathed Kez. 'The last conversation I had before I came here.'

'I knew you were going to say that,' Austin chuckled, flicking back to today's conversation. 'And this thing knew that I'd say *that*! Madness.'

Horror tore its way through Kez as she realised what was happening. Austin Lang knew everything, from right now, to seven hundred and forty-nine years into the future. Every day. Every event. Every word.

'I'm going to need your uniform, and that disguise of yours,' Austin said, double checking that his instinctive words lined up with the transcript. Kez nodded, happy to have a small window of time to think as she stripped down to her Affinity shorts and vest. If she could get that dataflake back, then she could stop this, right here, right now. Paradoxes be damned.

'Here,' said Austin, throwing a dirty jumper and jeans over to Kez from a large pile of washing. 'I'm a monster, not a pervert.'

Kez pulled the jeans on quickly before flinging the jumper over herself. As it slipped over her head, she lunged for the dataflake, hoping for an element of surprise that she no longer had. Austin fired a shot, hitting Kez in the side and causing her to stagger back onto the sofa. She clutched at the wound, an action she regretted thanks to the stinging pain that accompanied it. Austin walked over to her, placed the screwdriver and beacon on her lap, and waved her goodbye.

'Abyssinia, Kez,' he winked, pressing the extra button on the beacon and sending Kez to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

‘So this entire time, every step, Austin Lang has known exactly what was going to happen?’ Iscah spat, glaring at Theo. ‘We never stood a chance.’

‘My whole life,’ Eureka whispered. ‘It wasn’t just Robbie. He’s orchestrated my entire life.’

‘Kez was right,’ grumbled Theo. ‘We never had free will.’

Every eye in the room turned to Theo, each one attempting to cook him with a stare.

‘Again, not a mole,’ said Theo, now seemingly just annoyed at his predicament. ‘This is all news to me too.’

‘On top of that, he stole my disguise,’ said Kez, indicating her baggy replacement clothing. ‘He could be anyone, at any time.’

‘Wait,’ said Alphonse, slowly raising his hands to his sides, like he was about to heave up an idea so great it might knock him off balance. ‘This is fantastic.’

‘In what fucking universe …’ muttered Kez.

‘Austin knew everything we were going to do up until the moment Kez left to see him,’ said Alphonse, a grin rolling across his facial lava. ‘Knew. *Past tense.*’

‘I don’t see how that’s an advantage,’ shrugged Iscah.

‘It’s not,’ said Alphonse. ‘But right now Austin Lang doesn’t have that advantage either. We’re on a level playing field for the first time since we started.’

Alphonse looked around the room, beaming. Theo raised a tethered hand the best he could.

‘Sure,’ he said tentatively. ‘Can I just point out that we’re only just coming to a realisation that Austin Lang has had for over seven centuries? In his place, wouldn’t you have spent at least some of that time planning for today?’

Alphonse’s smile faded. ‘You know, if you are the mole,’ he grumbled, ‘I call dibs on throwing you out the airlock.’

On the other side of *Lucas*, lying upon Malcolm’s workbench in the engineering bay, a secret timer ended, enacting a plan seven hundred and forty-nine years in the making. The SD card which had been recovered on Venus dissolved, breaking down into nanobots who got to work boring a small hole through the protective casing that Malcolm had applied to all of the temporal artefacts. The nanobots

scuttled out, a fifth of them discovering and logging the locations of the other time machine fragments, the rest freeing these pieces and laying them out on the table. After all the pieces were prepared, aside from one quantumly damaged screw, the nanobots began to cut, weld, and solder a small device together. When it was complete, the nanobots formed a line, starting at the machine and ending at the closest power bank. The instant the last nanobot fell into place a shot of electricity ran through them all, the device fired, and Austin Lang claimed control of *Lucas*.

The first the crew of *Lucas* knew of their upcoming demise was when the room began to flood with every remaining nanobot left onboard. The tiny dark-blue machines poured in through the walls, dripped from the ceiling in clumps, and eked their way out of consoles, gathering together, forming a cylindrical mound between Theo and the rest of the crew. As they pooled, Alphonse noticed a flash of metal underneath them.

'They're building something!' he roared, leaping into action. He pounced, only to be met with a pillar of nanobots lunging out in his direction, nailing him in the chest. His personal shielding held, but the impact flung him back the way he came, crashing through a console hard. Iscah stepped forward, but a matching spike extended out towards her, tracking her neck as she paced back and forth, keeping her at bay.

Thirty seconds later, the nanobots retreated to reveal a transporter platform, which sprung into life immediately, allowing Austin Lang to step foot into his new temporal control room.

'Well, Kez,' he grinned, fuelled by the looks of hatred hitting him from every direction. 'I did tell you I'd be seeing you again.'

With a victorious laugh Austin snapped his fingers, and somebody in the room died.

Chapter Twenty-Five

A.L.

VENUS MINING COLONY | 2543 | EARLIER

'Why doesn't this place have elevators?' Eureka whined as the crew descended yet another floor of staircases towards the ground.

'You want to get back onto a mechanised device after what just happened with the conveyor belts?' Kez asked, half a staircase ahead of her.

'Good point,' Eureka panted.

'This way!' Iscah yelled, kicking a door to the Venusian surface open. A strong wind entered the building, along with an entire haunted house worth of dust.

'Spread out,' Theo barked as he began to search the colossal area around them. The team split up, scanning the ground for anything that could be the remains of the time machine.

Eventually, after dodging a colossal industrial vehicle, Theo found the debris. Only it wasn't debris. It was a phone, battered from the fall, likely full of data and information about Austin Lang. This was it. The answers they'd been seeking.

He stamped on it, hard, again and again, obliterating as much of it as he could. When he was done he poked through the ruins, fished out the remains of an SD card, and threw them into the wind. Then, very carefully, he retrieved a second SD card from his pocket, one that Austin had slipped into his palm during their handshake, and nestled it into the remains.

'Bollocking fuck,' Theo said a few moments later as Iscah ran over to his side. 'Someone's run over the fucking thing!'

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Malcolm knew he was dead from the moment he felt Theo press something into his body. Destructive enzymes, carefully curated to break down the bonds that held him together, shot across his form, distributed by a charged magnetic field. He couldn't help but

appreciate the design of such a monstrous piece of equipment as he dissolved.

'NO!' Eureka yelled as Malcolm evaporated into a blue shimmer, eventually fading into nothing.

'Someone always goes to pieces in situations like these,' Theo chuckled, walking over to Austin and shaking his hand. 'Good to see you again.'

'Likewise,' Austin said, pulling Theo into a hug. 'Was the finger snap too much?'

'Yeah,' nodded Theo, scrunching his face up playfully. 'I know you love theatrics but you did it last time you were here.'

'So I did,' Austin nodded. 'Good note, I'll keep that in mind.'

'Bastard,' Kez spat.

'*Bastards*,' Iscah corrected, aware she'd be up to her neck in their viscera already if the nanobots weren't protecting them.

'Right then,' said Theo. 'I suppose you want to hear my side of the story.'

Kez gritted her teeth. Theo laughed.

'I've known Austin my entire life,' he said, punching his apparent friend in the arm. 'He's the reason I survived Venus. He was the pilot of the damn shuttle that pulled me out of there.'

'It was the least I could do,' nodded Austin. 'I did build the asteroid which, come on now, was some of my finest work. Gathering the kifoium, locking it away in a hive of stasis fields. It took *decades*.'

'You didn't half worry me the second time I was there,' Theo said, turning slightly pale at the memory. 'A heads-up about the destroyed power cables would have been nice.'

'Oh, who can remember every Venusian joy ride they've been on?' Austin chuckled. 'Hope you didn't think you were going to die or anything. Can't *imagine* how traumatic that would have been.'

'Prick,' Theo laughed, flipping Austin off and teleporting away.

'Has anyone called them bastards yet?' groaned Alphonse, shaking off his collision and staggering to his feet.

'Oh, Dad's up,' said Austin. 'Good thing too, I've got something to show you.'

Austin reached into his back pocket, pulling out a dataflake. Despite it being a new model, it was old and battered, with a crack spiderwebbing across its glass surface.

'Seven hundred and forty-nine years I've been following this guide to the universe,' Austin said, throwing it across the floor to Alphonse.

‘From the moment I took it from Kez, to the moment she went back in time to have it taken. Every moment in history, every choice you thought you were making, every damn tragedy of the past, I was there. I made them happen. I followed your history, my future, to the letter.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Kez saw Alphonse staring down at the dataflake. He looked broken, both physically and mentally.

‘Keep it,’ Austin said. ‘It’s served its purpose. The copy has been made and sent back with Kez. That loop is closed.’

Alphonse punched the floor, hard.

‘It wasn’t always easy,’ Austin continued. ‘There were some gaps here and there. It turns out some people didn’t exist, so I became them. I filled in these spaces, keeping history on the straight and narrow. Oh, the people I have been …’

‘You killed so many,’ Iscah hissed.

‘Yeah,’ shrugged Austin. ‘Some of them broke my heart, but when the sun set, I had kept another day in line.’

Austin walked over to Eureka, his nanobot defence circling around him like tiny piranhas. ‘Remember Robbie Onions?’ he grinned. ‘One moment of panic during an exam, and whoops, Brandon Coulter is no longer a pilot. He’s an engineer. Your engineer.’

Eureka clenched her fists tight, her nails digging into her palms, a raw nerve being exposed and cut.

‘Hilariously, I thought that it was a mistake that *Coulter* made that destroyed the *Paracosm*,’ chuckled Austin. ‘I needn’t have bothered with Robbie at all.’

Kez matched Eureka’s stance, rage burning away at her edges.

‘You all know it was Eureka, right?’ Austin laughed, falling back into a nanobot chair. ‘She destroyed the *Paracosm*. Right before launch, there were reports of structural damage across the hull. In that situation, according to the *Paracosm* handbook, the captain should consider an abort. And I should know, I wrote the damn thing. But no, Eureka needed the fame. The glory.’

Kez looked over to Eureka, and was surprised to see that the defiance had fallen away from her, her eyes begging Austin to stop talking.

‘People died, it was her fault, and now she’s plastered onto every ship for good luck,’ said Austin. ‘Imagine that. It’s like if every boat had a plaque celebrating the iceberg.’

‘That’s a lie,’ spat Kez. ‘Eureka Shine is a hero.’

Eureka didn’t say anything. She just hung her head in shame.

‘Iscah!’ Austin exclaimed, moving to his next target. ‘Did you know we’ve already met? On Aradisi! I was the guard with the backwards gun and the keys you needed dangling off my back pocket. You could have pinched them, honestly, you’ve got a sleight of hand that would rival the world’s greatest finger-smiths. But no, you had an opportunity to attack a man from behind, so you took it. No wonder your god wants nothing to do with a nasty piece of work like you.’

He imitated the pipe attack, ending it with a tiny ‘bop’.

‘So those missions were just to mess with us?’ asked Kez. ‘Is that it?’

A fist-sized sphere of nanobots shot through the air, colliding hard with Kez’s jaw. Iscah stepped forward, a spike of nanobots millimetres from her neck.

‘That’s for not listening,’ snarled Austin from his chair. ‘Time isn’t cause and effect. It all happens at once. All of it. Nothing I did was for fun. Nothing was to mess with you. I was following the timeline to the letter as it had always been written. Sure, I might have enjoyed some of it, I *loved* watching those thugs I paid off chasing you around the spa, but if you’ve got a problem with any of my actions, you’re best off taking it up with the universe.’

Kez spat blood onto the floor. A single fleck landed on Austin’s shoe. Austin bent down and wiped it away with his thumb as Theo returned.

‘We’re ready,’ he said, tilting his head at Kez’s bloody lip.

‘Excellent,’ clapped Austin. ‘Here we go then.’

The station shook as the time machine deactivated, the whirling blades gradually coming to a halt and folding themselves away.

‘YOU’LL KILL US ALL, YOU MORONS!’ Alphonse yelled, looking up into the heavens, assuming he’d see Ipricus begin its final approach.

He did not.

‘It’s … retreating,’ gasped Eureka.

Above them, Ipricus was shrinking, moving away faster than it had ever approached.

‘Theatrics,’ Theo sighed.

‘Why?’ asked Alphonse, watching the planet come to a standstill a safe distance away. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Still not figured it out?’ Austin sighed, disappointed. ‘I thought at least Kez would get it by now.’

Kez held her stare, wiping blood from her mouth with the side of her hand.

‘Fine,’ Austin groaned. ‘Here’s the masterplan …’

Austin paused, enjoying the rapturous attention he was holding.

‘Theatrics,’ coughed Theo again.

‘Oh, you love it,’ replied Austin with a wink. ‘Anyway, it’s really simple. I made a mistake, and I’m going to use this time machine to undo it. In ten minutes, this timeline will be reset, and I will get my wife and child back.’

‘You fucking dumbass,’ breathed Kez. ‘Last time you tried this you wrote off half of London.’

‘I did,’ nodded Austin. ‘A mere miscalculation.’

‘He’s carried all the ones this time,’ Theo chuckled, failing to notice the look of daggers that Austin shot him.

‘The previous failure was inevitable,’ Austin said. ‘We had already met in the distant past, dooming my attempt. Now however, after so many lifetimes of work, the timeline is pure. I can reset it, cleanly.’

Austin held his hand out, palm down, as a blob of nanobots climbed up towards it. They reached his hand and melded themselves into a firearm, one that Austin slowly wrapped his fingers around.

‘You know, after seven and a half centuries of knowing every single event that’s going to occur, I must confess a level of excitement. I legitimately don’t know how you’ll answer this question.’

The station shook a familiar shake. The time machine was starting up again.

‘Would any of you like to leave?’ Austin asked, checking that his gun was loaded.

‘Bullshit,’ spat Iscah.

‘I assure you this is quite real,’ said Austin. ‘I’m willing to send each of you back in time, far away from here, with no way of getting back. You’ll live out quiet little lives, die quiet little deaths, and be blissfully unaware when everything ends.’

‘Back in time?’ rasped Alphonse. ‘I don’t buy it. We could change history!’

‘You can’t,’ grinned Austin. ‘Didn’t Osheen tell you? This machine of his has protections from paradoxes. You change too much, you’ll be erased before you even leave.’

‘Like Jack?’ Kez wondered.

‘Just like Jack,’ nodded Austin. ‘He triggered the erasure by simply coming into contact with the focal point of the machine. Imagine how fast it’ll wipe you out if it’s *trying*.’

‘What if we refuse to go back?’ asked Iscah.

‘Well,’ shrugged Austin. ‘I am holding a gun.’ He jumped from his chair, raw excitement crackling across his body. ‘Here we go then!

Who first?'

'Me,' growled Alphonse. 'I am the captain. It has to be me.'

'Nah,' said Austin. 'I'm saving you for last. You're old right? Might save a bullet if old age gets to you first.'

Austin paced in front of the group, locking eyes with everyone as he passed them.

'Well, let's do the only one I'm sure about first,' he said, stopping in front of Eureka and pressing a gun into her forehead. 'What's it going to be?'

Kez looked over to Eureka, Austin's gun holding up her limp head.

'I just want to go home,' she said quietly.

'Eureka—'

'Oh what is it *now*, Alphonse?' she yelled, tears streaming down her face. 'What possible reason do you people need me to stay for this time? What else do I have to learn about my legacy? Can you possibly understand what it's like to know for a fact that you'll never accomplish anything more? That you and your contributions are done? That you no longer matter!?'

Austin pulled his gun away from Eureka's face, nodding to himself.

'You could stay here,' said Iscah, grabbing Eureka by her arms and looking her dead in the eye. 'Matter *now*.'

Eureka shook her head and pulled Iscah into a hug. They held each other for some time.

'I abandoned Kez to talk to my dad,' Eureka said as she pulled away. 'Austin's right, I always put myself first. I'm no hero. Never was.'

Inside the time machine, the temporal focal point began to fall out of the universe. Theo programmed in Eureka's destination on a nearby console.

'I would have done the same,' Kez said over the noise. 'I promise you I would.'

Eureka smiled.

'No. I don't think you would have.'

Eureka snapped out of space, reappearing inside the time machine. Seconds later a bolt of emptiness struck her, sending her back in time. Kez hoped beyond hope that Austin wasn't lying, and that she was back with Lily.

'Next!' Austin announced as the time machine roared on. 'How about … eenie meenie miney … you?'

Kez, still staring at the space where Eureka had just stood, turned back to Austin, ready to be looking down the barrel of a gun. She

wasn't.

'Very funny,' Theo said, putting his hands up jokingly. 'Now stop pissing about, some of us aren't as immortal as you.'

Austin sauntered over to Theo, pressing his gun into his skull.

'Fancy taking me up on my offer?' he asked coldly. 'Remember, honesty is a wonderful policy when the person asking the questions is holding a gun.'

'We had a deal,' Theo chuckled nervously. 'I help you, you let me watch the fireworks.'

'Deal's off,' said Austin. 'I can't risk you having a change of heart.'

Theo opened his mouth to argue, but something flashed over his eyes, like he suddenly remembered who he was talking to. With as much force as he could, he leaned forward, digging the barrel of the gun into his own head.

'Go to hell,' he spat.

Austin chuckled softly. 'If only.'

Theo watched as Austin's finger coiled around the trigger, slowly applying pressure. He closed his eyes, not wanting to know when the moment was.

'AUSTIN!' screamed Alphonse. 'NO!'

Austin pulled the trigger, kicking the primer, igniting the gunpowder, and sending a bullet crashing into and out of Theo's head, chunks of viscera following in its wake. His corpse fell backwards, unceremoniously landing on the command centre's floor with a squelch, the final sound anyone in that room made for some time.

Eventually, Austin stepped forwards to observe his handiwork. He crouched down, closed one eye, and lifted Theo's limp head up by his previously immaculate hair, manoeuvring it around briefly until he lined up the entry and exit wounds with Iscah. He gave her a cheery wave through his new peephole. 'You're up, sweetie!'

Theo's head splashed back into a pool of its own blood as Austin dropped it and approached Iscah. He kicked a bit of Theo out of the way as he walked, and pressed the gun into her head. She winced, the hot metal scalding her.

'Same question, sweetie,' said Austin. 'Do you wanna be in team Austin?'

'Where would you even send me?' Iscah muttered. 'I have no ties to the past.'

'Well, I figured you'd want to help as many people as possible,' Austin said. 'I was thinking a few days before Venus. Keep people from

work, delay shuttles, use what you know to save as many people as you can.'

Kez watched as Iscah's mind played the possibilities out in front of her. The lives saved. The families kept whole. It was hard to resist.

'From what you've said, it won't matter,' Iscah eventually said. 'Nothing will.'

'Nothing does,' agreed Austin. 'In the grand scheme of it all, the universe will burn to cold ash and life will not go on. Yet, I've spent centuries working to claim just a fraction of that time back with someone I care for. That's my purpose. What's yours?'

Iscah looked up at Austin, slightly taken aback by how genuine he appeared to be.

'To help people,' she said.

Smiling, Austin pulled the gun from her head. He tapped a control, confirming her journey with the time machine. 'Then go help people.'

Iscah nodded, giving herself a moment to calm her breathing before moving over to hug Kez. She vanished before they made contact, leaving Kez with nothing to embrace but the air.

'Do I need to point the gun?' Austin asked Kez as the two of them finished watching the time machine send Iscah away. She closed her eyes, taking deep breaths as she relaxed her body. If this was it, the end of it all, then she wouldn't go out as a coward. She'd die for something, even if the people she believed in wouldn't. Briefly, she tried to contact E-NA, but nobody replied. Where was she?

'You could save your mum you know.'

Kez's eyes snapped open at Austin's words.

'I know where she vanished, but I don't know why,' Austin continued, the gun by his side. 'You could find her, go into hiding afterwards. That's what you wanted, right? That's why you came here? To save her?'

Kez nodded. 'Promise me you're not lying,' she whispered.

Austin came over to her, placing a hand delicately on her shoulder. 'I promise,' he replied. 'Prime's honour.'

Kez weighed up the offer. She could save her mum, but only if Austin was telling the truth. She glanced down at the remains of Theo, the last person who'd believed him. Then, she thought about her dad, millions of miles away, unaware of any of this. No matter what she picked, he was going to lose the last person in his life. Anger brewed inside her as she turned to face Austin.

'Point your damn gun,' she said.

‘Fair enough,’ said Austin, raising the gun. Kez closed her eyes.

‘AUSTIN!’ Alphonse yelled. ‘DON’T YOU DAR—’

A loud crack echoed around the temporal command room, cutting Alphonse off. Kez opened one eye, just in time to see one of Morag’s metal arms colliding with Austin’s face at high speed, sending him crashing into the glass wall behind him, his gun clattering to the ground.

‘Bit annoyed nobody realised I’d snuck out,’ said Morag, stepping in front of Alphonse and Kez. ‘Remind me to check both of your eyesight after this.’

‘You’ll pay for that,’ Austin growled, throwing a hand in front of him, waiting for a nanobot assault that was never to come, his eyes widening as he realised the swarm that surrounded him was still.

‘Oh, didn’t I mention?’ smirked Morag. ‘I kicked you out of the system. You’re defenceless.’

Alphonse and Kez’s simultaneous questions fell on deaf ears as Austin rose quickly, scrambling for his weapon.

‘No you don’t, sunshine!’ Alphonse yelled, bodying Austin and pinning him to the ground, blow after blow crashing directly into his face, none of them seemingly making a dent.

‘Is that all you’ve got?’ Austin grinned between the punches. With a flick of his eyes he vanished, as did his weapon.

‘He could be anywhere,’ said Alphonse. ‘We should regroup while we can.’

A shot rang out, pinging off Alphonse’s skull and leaving a crack in his forehead. He fell backwards, crashing onto the floor, unmoving.

A second shot teleported into the room, missing Kez by millimetres but catching Morag’s vat, cracking it. She slapped a metal hand against it, preventing further leaks. With a final crack, Austin re-entered the room behind Morag, slamming a hand onto her vat as a bundle of his personal nanobots shot through her systems, removing power from her limbs. Kez stepped forward, but Austin warned her back.

‘Steady on, Kez,’ he said, panting. ‘Only one person in here would survive a Plofbare explosion and he’s the one with the gun so … kneel.’

Kez stood firm, fists held tight.

‘NOW!’ Austin barked as he backed away as far as he could, gun locked onto Morag. ‘Kneel!’

Reluctantly as all hell, Kez knelt. Austin relaxed slightly. ‘That’s better. Now, let’s get back to my offer shal—’

He stopped; no eyes were on him. He spun around, coming face to

face with a sentient blue lightning bolt.

'Malcolm!?'

The Fibril Blue shook his form. 'A distraction,' he said.

A snooker-ball-sized robot collided with the back of Austin's head at full speed, knocking him to the ground. Malcolm sped forward, wrapping his form around Austin's neck, squeezing tightly. As the two struggled, Kez ran over to Morag and ripped her top panel off, exposing circuitry.

'Shut up and give me a second,' she said, hastily rewiring. 'I'll get you back on your feet.'

'I thought I … killed you,' Austin gurgled, his hands clawing at the thin body around his neck, trying to find purchase.

'In a manner of speaking, you did,' replied Malcolm. 'My form was reduced to vapour, rendering me deceased. However, as I still had work to complete, I simply decided to reconstitute myself.'

'You … can … do … that!?' gagged Austin.

'Obviously,' replied Malcolm. 'It is an exceedingly painful process so most Fibril Blue do not attempt it. I, however, did not want you to injure my friends further.'

'I'll … remember that … for next time.'

'Incorrect,' said Malcolm. 'There will not be a next time.'

Moments later an electrical surge shot across Morag's vat, shorting out the invading nanobots and giving her back control of her limbs.

'Dreadful bedside manner,' said Morag, quickly running benchmarks on her system.

'I learned from the best,' said Kez, getting out of the way as Morag and her metal arms re-entered the fray, crushing whatever part of Austin they could grip, seemingly to no effect. As Morag took control of the battle, Malcolm slipped away, vanishing through a small port.

'What happened to first do no harm?' Austin sputtered, the assault taking him off his feet.

'You're immortal,' Morag spat back. 'This *is* no harm.'

While they fought, Kez leapt over to Alphonse, whose vitals were being checked by Bea. 'He's alive,' she reported. 'Unconscious, but alive.'

Kez nodded, happy to have not lost another friend today. As she stood, ready to enter the fight again, she realised what she still had in her pocket. A weapon.

With a whoosh of air, Austin went sailing over Kez's head, landing hard on the floor by her. She heard bones break.

‘Wait, wait,’ Austin said as Morag stepped over him. ‘I know things. Important things. There’s someone you need to be far more worried about than me. The brains behind all of this. I can tell you where she is!’

‘What are you talking about?’ Morag asked, letting her guard down for a moment too long. Austin flicked his eyes, activating his own teleporter once again. He appeared behind Morag, gun back in his hand.

‘Bye, everyone,’ he snarled, finger on the trigger.

Kez leapt forward, a screwdriver engraved with the initials ‘A.L.’ in her hand. With all of her might she thrust it into Austin’s neck, sending a fountain of blood arcing across the command room in response.

‘That’s for Theo,’ she whispered into his ear.

Austin stumbled back, hands weakly grasping at the screwdriver, unable to pull it free from himself. With a gurgling set of wet breaths, he fell to the floor, eyes greying over, mouth hanging open limply. Then, suddenly, he was fine again, eyes blinking, breath stabilising. Then he died all over again.

‘What the fuck?’ Kez asked as she watched the blood dripping from his incisors vanish, only to begin dripping again moments later as his eyes rolled back for a third time.

‘You’ve hit his carotids,’ said Morag. ‘When he snaps back to life, they’ll rupture, blood will fill his brain and he’ll die again.’

‘Does it hurt?’ Kez asked, watching as Austin clawed at the floor before dying again, his nails scratching a thin line of paint away.

‘Oh yeah,’ Morag said, glancing over at Theo’s body. ‘It’ll fucking sting.’

Another crack of air filled the room as Malcolm returned, this time with a small box in tow. He attached the device to Austin’s body, enveloping him in a thin, green field.

‘Osheen’s stasis cube,’ Malcolm said. ‘Hopefully, this will hold Austin for the time being.’

‘Couldn’t you have let him die a few more times?’ Morag asked bitterly.

‘I am not one to partake in revenge,’ replied Malcolm. ‘No matter how much I may wish to.’

Morag nodded and gently patted Malcolm before they turned to take in the devastation that surrounded them. A command centre ripped apart by battle, blood slowly leaking into circuitry, flames melting wires and, in the middle of it all, the broken remains of a once good

friend.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Resignation

LUCAS | 2783

‘TIME TRAVEL!?’ Kez’s dad yelled, almost falling out of his harness and broadcasting a serious accident back to her. ‘You’ve been travelling in time?!’

‘Shhhh,’ Kez hissed down the line, finger on lips. ‘I’m not really supposed to tell anyone.’

Fred swayed slightly next to the panel he was meant to be fixing up, wires ignored. First, after days of agonising waiting and assuming the worst, he’d found out that his Kezia was still alive, despite being thrown into space. Now, this. He was having a very good day.

‘So where have you been?’ he enquired.

‘All over,’ said Kez, counting each location off on her fingers. ‘Venus, Collins University in the twenty-second century, Earth twice, once in the twenty-first century, once, well, technically twice millions of years ago, Aradisi—’

‘Aradisi?!’ her dad shouted. ‘The dream!’

‘I’ve been to ancient Earth and you’re excited about a spa,’ Kez said.

‘Hell of a spa though,’ chuckled Fred. ‘What was it like?’

Kez thought back. The explosion in the pool. The team sent to kill her. The gunfire. ‘Less relaxing than I’d hoped,’ she said.

‘Did you pinch me anything?’ her dad asked, semi-seriously.

‘Dad!’ giggled Kez.

‘You know how I like my retro tools,’ he shrugged. ‘Fabricated ones just don’t meet my rigorous collector’s standards you know.’

‘Nerd,’ said Kez, sticking her tongue out. ‘Actually, I did nick you a small souvenir. A screwdriver. Twenty-first century.’

‘You’re having me on!’ Fred said, almost salivating at the thought of classic tools from that era. ‘Can I see it?’

Kez shook her head.

‘Somebody’s using it right now,’ she said, trying to not think too hard about the last time she saw it.

‘Using it?!’ Fred exclaimed. ‘They’d better be taking care of it!’

Another call lit up the corner of Kez’s vision. Fatoumata.

‘I’ve got a call coming in,’ Kez said. ‘Mind if I put you on hold?’

‘Who could possibly be more important than your old man?’ Fred laughed.

With a mischievous grin, Kez shared her vision, showing her dad exactly who was calling. He blanched.

‘Bugger me,’ he mumbled. ‘Fair enough.’

‘Kez,’ said Fatoumata, replacing her dad’s face as they appeared. ‘I’m so sorry about the events of the past few days. Had I known how dangerous the mission was going to be, I never would have—’

‘Is this the same apology that my dad received after Mum vanished?’ Kez spat, her brashness surprising even herself. ‘If so, I’d rather not hear it.’

Fatoumata sat silently, giving Kez the space to say anything else that was on her mind, their eyes full of enough genuine sincerity to make an outraged person sick.

‘No,’ they said eventually. ‘Harker was a close friend. Your father and I spoke about her on many occasions.’

‘He never said anything,’ Kez mumbled defeatedly.

‘Wilfred was never one to look backwards,’ Fatoumata replied. ‘He even stripped you of her surname, not out of anger, but out of kindness, so you’d not be forced to think about her every time you heard your own name.’

Kez glanced into the corner of her vision, where her dad was waiting for her to return. He was sitting up far straighter than normal.

‘What happened to my mum?’ Kez asked, trying to manually force her tear ducts shut. ‘I just need to know.’

‘So do I,’ said Fatoumata. ‘The official story is the truth as far as I know it. Harker, a Compat, and her shuttle vanished after a successful mission. No trace of them was ever found.’

A data transfer briefly occurred, as hundreds of records, logs, and documents marked with scary-looking ‘CLASSIFIED’ labels downloaded. At the top of all this, her mum’s official photograph, smiling back at her.

‘Here’s everything I know,’ said Fatoumata. ‘As a thank you for your work regarding Austin Lang.’

Kez’s reply caught in her throat, as in her vision, together for the first time in over a decade, she could see both her mum and her dad.

‘Don’t blame you, lass, not one bit,’ Alphonse said, heaving another box of Osheen’s things onto a heap. ‘As acting commander of this station, resignation accepted.’

With a shake of a hot hand, it was over. The last member of Osheen’s time-travelling team was gone.

‘Need help with any of this?’ Kez asked.

‘Nah,’ replied Alphonse. ‘You get yourself home. Rest up. Let these muscles work.’

‘I’m only popping home,’ said Kez. ‘After that, I’ve got two people to track down. My mum, and the person that Austin mentioned before we beat him. I have to find out who she is. Finish this properly.’

Alphonse dropped a box. Something inside it complained by shattering.

‘Don’t try and stop me,’ Kez said as Alphonse grew slightly. ‘I know it’s dangerous, but I won’t be able to sleep until I know this is over.’

‘Stop you?’ said Alphonse, a smile cracking across his face. ‘I’ll hire you!’

‘Huh?’ Kez blinked.

‘I’m not staying on this fucking station a second longer than I have to,’ Alphonse roared with laughter. ‘I’ve got a ship, a burning need for justice and nothing else to do. Fancy a bridge role?’

‘Oh, *hell yeah*,’ said Kez. A second hot handshake cemented the deal. Kez felt lighter. She wouldn’t have to do this alone. ‘What’s going to happen to all his stuff?’ she asked, noticing several stacks of notebooks that couldn’t possibly have fit inside this small office of Osheen’s.

‘Most of it will be handed over to Affinity scientists,’ he grunted. ‘So much of this is top secret that I’m legitimately wary of traps.’

Alphonse heaved four boxes into his arms and went to leave the room. At the doorway, he stopped.

‘If you happen to pinch a memento, I won’t stop you,’ he said softly. ‘He was an odd bugger, but I’m sure he’d want you to have something to remember all of this by. Just run it by Bea first. She kept an eye on him almost every day of his life, so she has first dibs on anything she wants.’

‘Thank you, Alphonse,’ Kez said, her words catching and tripping as they left her mouth.

‘Keep safe,’ Alphonse smiled as the doors slid shut behind him, leaving Kez alone in a den of memories and dust.

She glanced up at the shelves, heavy with awards and accolades and a few decorative pieces, and something that caught Kez’s eye. On the

top shelf, set right against the back wall, was a photo of someone she couldn't quite place. A smile beamed out from behind what was quite clearly someone's first attempt at a moustache. 'No fucking way,' she said softly, stepping over to the picture. It was up a little too high for her, so she wheeled a chair over and stood on it, bringing herself up to its height. It was Osheen. Young Osheen. Still in a student uniform, and holding up an award to the camera, the very same award that sat next to the picture, now dusty and yellowed. Kez smiled, gazing upon a face she wouldn't know until wrinkles had laid siege to it. A face so full of hope and kindness. A face that would change her life. A face she owed a lot to. She clasped the photo to her chest, attempted to hop off the chair, and felt the chair slide out underneath her. She lost her balance, causing her to panic and instinctively grab onto the top shelf, immediately shearing it from the wall and sending a third of a lifetime's worth of achievements crashing to the ground. The falling shelf hit the one below, taking out another third, before these awful, vertical dominoes finally took out the bottom shelf, leaving Kez on the floor, surrounded by broken awards, shattered ornaments, and splintered wood.

Shit.

Kez stood, panicking, trying to survey the damage through the mushroom cloud of dust that had formed in the room. As far as she could tell, the only thing that hadn't fallen off the shelves was a small white vase. She picked it up, nodding to herself angrily.

Well, that's one thing I didn't break.

In an attempt to reclaim some control over the moment, Kez decided to throw the vase in her hand into the air and catch it again. With a flick of the wrist, Kez sent the vase skyward, unfortunately letting it rotate in the air. Her face fell as the lid came loose and a grey cloud scattered itself over a large area of the office. Kez caught the vase again, now realising that this, as well as the other vases that lay strewn about the floor, were probably urns.

Fuuuck.

Kez figured that she probably had around a minute before Alphonse returned. A minute to clean up a mess that was starting to look like a laser-focused hate crime. She decided to grab anything urn-like and place it on Osheen's desk. First, a small, dark green vase, the name of a beloved pet engraved across its face. Then, a taller blue urn that might have actually been a vase. Then …

What?

Kez picked up a golden urn, but immediately felt something wrong with it. She twisted it in her hands, but it resisted the movement, like there was a gyroscope inside, trying to keep it upright.

Kez placed it on the desk, moving around it to inspect it properly. On one side, a small word was etched into the surface, filled in with a pitch-black ink.

'Emma.'

Curiosity getting the better of her, Kez flicked off the top and peered inside.

The colour drained from the world as it simultaneously began to spin. Kez gripped Osheen's desk to steady herself as she looked back into the urn.

Inside, there were far more insides than Kez expected. The urn was one of Osheen's portals, permanently folding spacetime to somewhere else in the universe. Specifically, a small holding cell, at the bottom of which lay a dead body.

Austin's.

No. It can't be …

A commotion outside brought Kez back to the room. Hastily she flung the lid back on and began to rub her head. Alphonse entered a second later, wiping tears from his eyes.

'Oh, man,' he said, still slightly out of breath from his laugh. 'Have you heard this joke that Bea just told me? A Tectato, a Plofbare, and a Human …' He trailed off, noticing the state both Kez and the room were in, and hurried over to her. 'Kez, are you alright?'

Kez shook her head, regretting that choice immediately as the room followed suit.

'Shelves fell on me,' she lied, stumbling past Alphonse to the exit. 'Medical bay. I need to go …'

'Do you want me to—'

'No,' Kez interrupted, vanishing around the doorway. 'I'll be OK. Thanks.'

The door slid closed, leaving Alphonse alone in the room. With a quick skim across his eyeball feeds he contacted Morag.

'Just know that you are interrupting a wildly interesting magazine article and I will hang up if you're less fascinating than it,' said Morag in his ears a few seconds later.

'Hey,' Alphonse replied. 'Kez just left here looking terrible—'

'And as head chef you're taking full responsibility?' Morag chuckled. 'That's kind of you.'

‘Morag, I—’

‘Don’t worry, you little volcano,’ Morag said warmly. ‘If she’s not here in a few minutes I’ll send a scout out for her.’

‘Morag …’ Alphonse said darkly.

Morag sat up slowly. ‘I don’t like that tone, Alphonse.’

Alphonse’s mouth went dry, cracking as it hardened. He picked the golden urn up off the desk, his lava rapidly beating against his shielding.

‘I think she found the body.’

A deafening silence crashed over the pair.

‘Oh, *fuck*,’ whispered Morag.

On seeing the incoming call, Baxter woofed in delight, his tail waving side to side at full power. This wasn’t a dignitary, a government official, or an ambassador.[fn58] This was a normal person. Someone he could try out his new greeting on.

‘You’ve got Baxter,’ he barked.

‘Baxter?’ said the voice on the other side. ‘I thought this was Fatoumata’s number?’

‘They’re working, Kez,’ barked Baxter, desperately trying to not ask for a review. ‘Can I pass on a message?’

‘Sure,’ said Kez, running while she spoke. ‘Tell Fatoumata to come here, to *Lucas*. It’s urgent. I think we were wrong about Austin Lang.’

‘Is that so?’ Baxter barked, his tail dropping. ‘I shall pass on the message immediately.’

‘Thanks,’ said Kez, vanishing.

Baxter sat for a moment, whimpering softly to himself. Afterwards, he returned to his tea-making duty, upending a vial of black liquid into Fatoumata’s favourite cup.

Kez burst into the medical bay, her shoulder crashing off the opening door as she ran over to Austin’s frozen body and started to deactivate his stasis field.

‘What are you doing?’ Morag asked angrily. ‘You’ll wake him up!’

‘This isn’t Austin Lang,’ Kez said, ripping the stasis cube away from the body and throwing it behind her. It shattered as it hit the corner of a table. ‘I don’t know who it is, but it’s not Austin.’

The field shimmered away, causing Austin to drop onto the floor, his head drooping to one side. Kez bent down, heart exploding in her chest, and yanked the screwdriver out of his neck.

'Take this,' said Kez, handing it over to Morag. 'If he gets up, kill him.'

Austin twitched, his eyes clearing. He blinked, breathed, and died again. And again. And again.

'Kez,' said Morag, one arm on her shoulder, two others slowly loading a dark green liquid into a syringe. 'What are you doing?'

'Why is he still dying without the screwdriver in his neck?' Kez asked in a focused panic. 'Exactly the same way, every time, in a loop? What is killing him?'

'Maybe we didn't understand exactly what was wrong with him,' Morag offered. Internally, Kez tried to connect to Austin, wondering if he had an NPC installed. He must have had one. How else could he control the nanobots?

'Kez,' said Morag, as a nearby monitor flashed red. 'What are you up to?'

Kez made contact, and was immediately smothered with information and warnings. Digging through all of this would have been easier with E-NA, but Kez hadn't heard from her since they returned from the twenty-first century. She was still in her head, that much she knew, but for some reason they couldn't make contact.

'I'm just deactivating the NPC subsystems,' said Kez. 'Forcing a reset if I can.'

'That's highly—' Morag began, but was interrupted by Austin collapsing lifelessly to the ground, and the nearby monitors going berserk. 'You killed him!' Morag squealed. 'Get out of the way, let me help him!'

Kez never heard this order; she was too busy reading the medical logs that she'd just pulled from Austin. 'He'd been dead for a while,' she said slowly. 'Weeks, maybe months.'

She dug further, unaware of how close Morag was behind her.

'The virus. The one in all the Affinity systems. It's here, inside his NPC,' Kez sputtered. 'It was … puppeteering his muscles. Vibrating his vocal chords. Thinking for him.'

Kez leaned forward, running a hand across the back of Austin's neck.

'Kez,' Morag said again, readying the syringe. 'Come on now …'

Kez found what she was looking for. A small strip of metal under her fingertips, but invisible to her eyes. She slid her nails under it, and

pulled it away from the body. Immediately, a field of light deactivated and cascaded to the floor, revealing the milky eyes of a very familiar face. Kez stood slowly, bile pressing against the back of her own throat as she gazed down at the remains of herself, each wound from the fight now visible. Her own dead body, lying on the floor, a love letter to inevitability.

'What the fuck is going on?' Kez whispered, before she felt a sharp scratch across her arm. Darkness immediately filled her periphery as she felt her lungs tighten up. She fell, saved only from cracking her head on the table by one of Morag's arms.

'I'm sorry, sweetie,' Morag said quietly, laying Kez onto the floor. 'This is for your own good.'

Before Kez could say anything, a darkness swept over her, swallowing her whole.

With a sharp intake of breath, Kez regained consciousness. Her eyes creaked open, revealing that the cold, flat object pressing hard into the side of her face was a console on the bridge of *Lucas*.

'I've always wanted to say this in context,' said an ominous voice standing over her, heavy and slow. 'But I would have gotten away with this if it wasn't for you meddling kids.'

Kez attempted to stand, but discovered that her wrists and ankles were bound tightly to the chair she was in.

'Doesn't really work,' the voice sighed. 'I *have* gotten away with this.'

Kez looked up, directly into the face that had betrayed her. It wasn't who she expected.

'Osheen!?'

Osheen nodded solemnly, Bea floating around him.

'I knew I'd mess up the dismount,' he said, his voice different to before. Larger somehow. 'I feel like one of those gymnasts that flawlessly flips a hundred times, then lands like a chair that's been thrown out of a fifth-floor window.'

'You're Austin …' said Kez. 'The real Austin.'

Osheen nodded. Behind him, Morag, Malcolm, and Alphonse were bustling about, keeping the station running. None of them seemed to notice Kez was there.

'Well, I used to be,' he said. 'Haven't been for a long time now. I like to live my lives, you know?'

Osheen leaned forward, grasped one of his remaining hairs with two fingers and plucked it out. It persisted after detachment, unlike the one Eureka pulled on Aradisi.

'Skin grafts, pulled tightly across my real body, updated daily. Method acting, in a way. Adds to the believability.'

Osheen tapped his neck, activating a disguise strip. Suddenly, his neck exploded into blood as a deep gash appeared across it.

'Wonderful for adding drama,' Osheen said, pulling the disguise off and throwing it to one side, his neck once again whole. 'But not functional for long-term use. Practical effects are always better than CGI.'

Osheen sat opposite Kez. He leaned on the console, fingers steepled, eyes intense.

'In my eight centuries of life, I have realised that humans have a single, inescapable flaw. They crave simplicity over all else. Why wouldn't they? It's comforting. We like our monsters, and we like our angels.'

Silently, Alphonse wandered over, placing a cup of tea next to Osheen. He bowed slightly and left, ignoring Kez.

'Let's look at an example,' Osheen continued. 'The London explosion, which I was responsible for, gave birth to decades of conspiracy theories. Some blamed the UK government, who they believed destroyed London to prevent the Marburg virus from becoming a pandemic, like the great fire of old. Others blamed climate terrorists, who used the explosion as a threat, warning other countries to fix our broken planet, or else. Some considered it an act of Scottish aggression, which would have been funny if it hadn't led to people being attacked in the streets.'

Osheen pushed the tea away, causing the small spoon resting in its saucer to wobble slightly.

'Do you see the connective tissue between all of these? They all have an enemy. Governments, terrorists, countries, people believed these lies because they simplify our fear, making it easier to digest. We sleep at night because we know the truth. There are monsters, and there are angels.'

Osheen sat back slightly, inspecting Kez's face, gauging her opinion before she gave it.

'Here's the real truth,' he continued. 'The world we all know could fall down at any moment, crumbling to ash, and we'll never know why. There is no black and white, no monsters or angels. There's only

us, and we're complicated bastards.'

Morag walked over, handing Osheen a digital clipboard. He glanced at it, nodded to her, and passed it back.

'Then, you came along and left me with a tool. With it, I could help everyone to accept the nuances of life. Divisions would fade, battle lines would be erased, and a common ground could be reached. With the guidance of the dataflake, the galaxy could become a paradise.'

Kez kept silent, her breathing slow and steady.

'However, I had a problem,' continued Osheen. 'Plugging holes in the timeline was exhausting. For centuries I was running around the galaxy, desperately trying to keep it in order, and only just managing. I needed help.'

Suddenly, Osheen's crew turned to him. Eyes on Kez, he picked up his cup of tea and poured the steaming liquid slowly onto the ground, in a full view of everyone. He returned the cup to its saucer, then turned to his crew. 'Bugger,' he sighed. 'I've just spilled my tea.'

'You clumsy sod,' Alphonse chuckled, suddenly springing to life. 'We got any paper towels around?'

'Paper towels?' Morag exclaimed, ordering nanobots to clean the spill. 'What kind of starship bridge has paper towels?'

'This one,' Malcolm said, tapping a wall panel which slid out, revealing a whole host of cleaning products. 'We are fully equipped for every eventuality.'

Osheen raised his hand, causing his crew to freeze on the spot, an eerie silence replacing the friendly banter.

'What have you done to them?' Kez gasped.

'Them?' Osheen asked, a fleeting smile indicating pride in this endeavour. 'Oh, Kezia. I've done this to *everyone*.'

Without warning, Kez's head exploded into pain again, driving her back into her chair.

'Everyone, except you,' Osheen scoffed as Kez writhed in her seat. 'Faulty NPC apparently, likely from your spacewalk. Don't worry, eventually I'll control you too.'

'Control?' Kez grunted, the source of the pain ceasing, the echoes of it lingering.

'The NPC,' Osheen said. 'My invention. If need be, I can remotely take over anybody with one, from humans to the Fibril Blue. Hell, even Compat architecture is built on the same subsystems. I don't take full control often, most people will live their lives untouched. However, if needs must, they'll assist me in whatever way I see fit. After, I wipe

their memories. Nobody is any the wiser, no matter what I made them do.'

'That's what the virus does,' Kez realised, her head rolling back as a dull headache thumped rhythmically. 'It's your backdoor.'

'Yes,' said Osheen. 'The dataflake only gave me instructions until today. If I wish to continue to maintain the peace, I needed a permanent solution.'

'You're not going to stop?'

'Why would I?' scoffed Osheen, getting to his feet and starting to pace around the bridge, slaloming around Kez's frozen friends. 'There is peace in the galaxy, and the further we spread, the more peace there'll be. Think about it, Kez. With me at the helm, the Affinity can bring about an era of *universal* peace.'

'What about your family?'

Kez barbed her question as best she could, but Osheen didn't seem fazed by it.

'It's been seven and a half centuries,' he said bluntly. 'I've moved on from some woman and child whose faces I don't even remember.'

'You loved them,' Kez said softly. 'You nearly tore time in two for them.'

Osheen shrugged. There was nothing there. Whatever warmth his heart had held, it had long since faded.

'So, what was the point of all of this?!' Kez yelled, exasperated. 'Chasing Austin across time, sending a planet after us, your sob story about Emma?!'

'Most of it was to keep the timeline straight,' Osheen said, returning to and leaning against his chair. 'A paradox could tear through everything like a bullet. Just look at Jack. That prick wrote off an entire universe, as well as a planet I'd spent a lot of time working on.'

Osheen shook his head, still annoyed.

'As for the rest of it, well, I figured the neatest way to remove you four from my life was to give you a good story. Theo was easy, as he was the only one of you who had an NPC that I could use. He played the traitor role well, don't you think?'

'He wasn't a mole …' Kez realised, grasping the sheer cruelty she was dealing with here. 'He never betrayed us.'

'Not knowingly,' said Osheen, taking a moment to imitate Theo's murder and chuckling. 'As for Eureka and Iscah, I knew they'd both leave after I broke their morale. I made them both want something, then offered it to them. Eureka will spend the rest of her life in hiding,

and Iscah won't make it off Venus this time.'

'And me?'

'Austin's death gurgle,' said Osheen. 'Some nonsense about there being someone else pulling the strings in the background. I knew you'd buy it, and not just because you play too many video games.'

'You offered me a monster,' Kez said.

'And like any angel, you accepted,' smiled Osheen. 'Off you would have gone, on a grand goose chase through the stars, eventually leading you back here.'

'But why?' Kez asked. 'Why not send me back with Eureka and Iscah?'

Suddenly, someone behind Kez grabbed her chair, spinning her around to face them. It was her own corpse, smiling back at her through glassed-over eyes. Her own dead body, Osheen's puppet.

'Because, whatever is stopping me from taking control of you now isn't there in the future,' Osheen said, ruffling the remaining hair of Kez's future self. 'I planned to monitor you as you gallivanted around the cosmos, to be sure there wasn't a trick. Now I know, you're just an extraordinarily clumsy bastard. Of course you'd write off an NPC.'

Osheen leaned in closer, studying Kez's face. 'You know what's funny? I killed you weeks ago, before we'd even met. You appeared when the dataflake said, and I put you down before you said a word. Your corpse has been on this station longer than you have.'

Kez pressed hard against the headrest of the chair, trying to move away from the smell of her own rotting flesh.

'Kezia, this is an inevitability,' said Osheen, grabbing her by the hair so she couldn't help but stare at that horrific smile. 'You will die, Kez, and because of that, the universe will know peace. What a *small* price to pay.'

'NO!' Kez screamed, yanking her hair from Osheen's hand. 'YOU'RE NOT INSIDE MY HEAD. YOU CAN'T CONTROL ME!'

'OK then,' shrugged Osheen calmly. 'You're free to go.'

Kez felt her restraints fall away from her ankles and wrists. Instantly she was up, putting as much distance as she could between her and her future self.

'This is a trick,' she said, backing herself against the wall.

'No trick,' said Osheen. 'Free will, for the first time in your life. You can leave this bridge, leave this station, and we'll never see you again.'

Kez inched around the outskirts of the bridge, her hands behind her, feeling for obstacles. Eventually she reached the door, which slid open

behind her.

'Sure, you'll probably sentence this universe to death by paradox, but, you know, your call,' said Osheen, waving her off. 'Bye, Kezia.'

Kez backed out of the door a few paces, before turning and running. She didn't get far.

'Oof, steady on,' said the person she'd just collided with. 'I've just had a big breakfast and I'd like it to stay put.'

Kez looked at the figure in her path, backing away as her heart began to crash about inside of her.

'Dad?'

'In the flesh,' he smiled, one hand gesticulating broadly, the other pressing a gun into his own head, something he was seemingly unaware of. 'Probably a bit too much flesh now you mention it. I swear that food printer adds sugar to all my orders.'

Kez turned back to Osheen. She shook her head, causing the tears rolling down her face to leave shaky trails.

'No,' she whispered. 'Anything but this.'

Osheen smiled, entering the corridor to admire the beauty of his plan. 'What a beautiful reunion with your old man. If only your mother could see you both now,' he said softly, before suddenly snatching Bea out of the air beside him. 'Oh wait, *she can*!'

He pressed Bea's shell, causing the opaque sphere to slide open, revealing the horrors within. Inside Bea, floating freely but locked onto Osheen, was a grey, bloodshot eyeball, nanobots crawling all over it as it warped and folded in space.

'She's been keeping an eye on me,' he smiled. 'Bea's insides aren't here. They're far away, inside your mother's skull. A remote, living feed keeping me in check, quantumly speaking. The result of decades of experimentation and a punishment, for coming after me in the first place.'

Morag and Alphonse entered the corridor, staring at Osheen.

'Unfortunately, as I now no longer have to hide, this concept has become redundant. It's time to retire it.'

Osheen tapped the top of Bea, running an old program across her circuits. Harker's eyeball faded away, leaving Bea hollow inside, save for a few components welded to her circumference.

'Well that's better,' said Bea, floating around the corridor faster than ever before. 'I feel so much lighter!'

'Fantastic!' smiled Osheen, watching her go. 'It's just a shame that Kez here could use you to track down that mother of hers. We can't be

having that, now can we?'

'Nope,' said Bea, floating back into Osheen's hand.

'Say bye, everyone,' he said cheerily.

'Bye, everyone!' Bea chirped.

Osheen squeezed, shooting a bolt of white cracks across Bea's surface, her shell creaking as it compacted. As the shattering glass dug into Osheen's hands, his blood dripped down Bea's shell. With a silent snap, the blood vanished, only to start oozing again as the glass dug once more into his freshly reset skin.

'STOP IT!' Kez yelled, reaching for Bea but being held back by her dad's arms gripping her tightly.

Osheen clasped a second hand over his first and finished the job. With a single burst of light from under his fingers, Bea died.

'That was my very best friend,' Osheen said, throwing her broken shell onto the floor. 'If I was willing to do that to her, just think what I'd be willing to do to *you*.'

With a nod, Osheen and his crew began to march Kez down to the time machine. As they walked, Osheen thought that he'd won. That he'd finally crushed Kez's morale into nothing. However, for the first time in several centuries, he was wrong.

Mum's still alive, Kez thought to herself, the fire of hope spreading across her chest.

Inside the time machine, and being shaken by its thundering power source, Kez sat, staring out towards the cosmos, her eyes barely bothering to focus.

'Ninety seconds,' Osheen announced over the speaker as his crew worked behind him.

That's not long, Kez thought to herself. *I should probably do something.*

She didn't. What could she do? Osheen had won this before she even knew she was playing. Every thought she might have, he'd planned for. Every escape route was cut off. Every exit had been blocked. She'd lost this battle, but now, somehow, she was determined to win this war.

'Sixty seconds.'

As the focal point began to fade, Kez spotted a flash in the space above *Lucas*. Something had just appeared. It was a Homeship.

It was the *Omphalos*.

Fatoumata had got the message. Kez stood, her heart jumping for joy

as she watched the colossal warship sail in close. Moments later a communication was broadcast. Osheen put it on the speakers.

'Osheen,' barked Baxter. 'It's done. Fatoumata is dead.'

Kez pressed herself against the side of the time machine, trying to see the visual part of the communication in the temporal command centre. In the centre of frame stood Baxter, his ears flopped over, tail stationary. Behind him, a body, slumped over in a chair.

'How, may I ask?' Osheen said.

'Poison,' Baxter barked. 'In the tea. Quick, painless.'

Osheen nodded solemnly.

'Good boy,' he whispered, ending the communication and turning to Kez.

'Why?' she asked softly, the words barely leaving her body. 'You loved them.'

'None of the leaders of the Affinity have an NPC,' Osheen shrugged, the speakers picking up the sadness tinging his voice. 'This was the only way.'

'You can't get away with this,' Kez said, despite both of them knowing otherwise. 'You've killed the leader of Earth.'

'Oh, Kezia,' Osheen said, shaking his head. 'Killed the leader of Earth? How can that be, when I'm standing *right here*?'

With that, Osheen enacted his final plan with the press of a single button. The time machine fired, sending Kez on her journey, and that was that. It was finally over.

Osheen, alone, victorious, took a moment. After centuries of work, it was done. The loops were tied up. The act was complete. He was free. He gazed up at the universe, at the multitude of life and wonder that lived, scattered about it, and went back to his plan of bringing it peace by any means necessary.

PART IV

Chapter Three

New Berlin

THE MOON | 2140

As soon as the door clicked shut behind her dad, Eureka Shine was on the move. She lowered herself out of bed, sliding straight into her favourite pair of bunny rabbit shaped slippers, and began to cross her bedroom using a strategic guide that disguised itself as a messy floor. Cuddly toys lay on the creakiest floorboards, glow in the dark stars marked corners of furniture, and pencils acted as rollers when the heavier boxes were slid into position. This left Eureka with a climbable path to her window.

'Hello, Computer,' Eureka whispered as she pulled herself onto the windowsill.

'Hello, Eureka,' the house computer whispered back. 'Shall I open the window for you?'

'Yes please.'

The window silently slid open, letting in the cold night air and the sounds of New Berlin, the moon's third largest city. Twelve storeys below her, tiny little people wandered about, their voices bright, energetic, and just a tad drunk, whatever drunk was. Occasionally, thin automatic trains whizzed by on floating rails with an electric hum. The air was filled with little robots scurrying about, delivering, cleaning, and repairing. In the distance, over the dark green crater forests, Eureka could hear the dull, echoing roar of the trade rockets taking off, transporting materials to and from all the planets in the Sol Alliance.

Eureka leaned back into her room. Outside her bedroom door she could hear that her parents were still awake, watching their latest show about grown-ups being upset at each other. *Perfect*, she thought, and jumped out into the night.

For an Earth national, the moon is a strange place to visit. Night-time lasts fifteen days, unfiltered daylight is hot enough to boil water, and the artificial atmosphere smells like lemon disinfectant. It never rains,

the Earth just kind of sits there in the sky, and the one time they hosted the Olympics was a disaster. They're still looking for the pole vaulters. For Eureka Shine the moon was home. She was born there, went to school there, and … well, that was about it so far. She was six and so her CV was unsurprisingly sparse. The quirks of moon life were normal to her, like the little arguments her parents would have about the gravity controls in the house. Mum just liked it far too high.

When Eureka jumped out of the window, she knew that she'd be caught. Covering every window of every building was a protective field, a film of energy that acted as a backup in case the city's thermal or atmospheric protection ever dropped out. Eureka, having asked the computer very nicely, had modified her window so that it expanded out at night times, like a bubble being blown from a wand.

Eureka landed on the extended sphere of energy and slid down, resting the back of her long, light hair on top of her windowsill. Now, directly in front of her were the stars. Eureka loved the stars. Tiny beads of light, each one of them ever so slightly green thanks to the layers of protection between her and the vacuum of space. Each one of them impossibly large and impossibly far away.

'What's that one?' Eureka whispered, pointing at a spot of light.

'Epsilon Pegasi,' the computer whispered back. 'A star over one hundred and eighty-five times bigger than the sun!'

'Woah!' Eureka gasped. She thought about the scale for a moment before failing to comprehend it and deciding to point again. 'That one?'

'That's a satellite,' the computer giggled.

'No,' Eureka huffed, pyjamaed arm pointing out with all her might. 'That blurry one! Right there!'

'That's the Andromeda Galaxy. The Milky Way's nearest neighbour. Trillions of stars orbiting a giant black hole over seven hundred and seventy kiloparsecs away.'

Eureka stared at the tiny, oval blur in the sky. 'Trillions,' she whispered to herself.

For a time, Eureka sat in silence. She watched as a massive carrier came in for a landing in the distance, its body glowing red in the thin atmosphere, leaving a trail across the sky as it fell back out of sight. 'I'm going to go there one day. I'm going to be a captain.'

'Andromeda?' the computer enquired.

'Space,' Eureka replied. She thought about it, then nodded as hard as she could, as if that somehow cemented it in her mind. 'Then

Andromeda.'

There was a pause as the computer processed this.

'Should I set a reminder for you?'

Eureka didn't get to reply. At that moment, a head popped out of the window above Eureka's. It was small, very ginger, and when it wasn't hanging out of the window, it belonged to Eureka's worst enemy at school.

'Hi, Lily,' Eureka said, waving.

'Maaaaaam!' Lily screamed, her head vanishing back into her room.

Eureka scrambled back up her bubble and jumped back into her bedroom, quickly dismantling the makeshift staircase as the computer reformed the energy shield behind her. As she travelled back she badly cut her arm on the corner of an un-starred table, but didn't take too much notice as she was busy pulling off her slippers. She threw herself onto her bed and buried herself under the covers, pretending to be asleep through the stinging pain in her arm.

A few minutes later, when her dad went to check up on her after receiving yet another complaint from the family above, Eureka's pretence had gotten the better of her. He strode over to Eureka and picked up a picture she had drawn that day. Her and Lily, or the closest approximations that a six-year-old could muster, holding hands next to a multicoloured rocket ship. He smiled, kissed his daughter on the head, and softly closed the door again.

'Computer?' he asked as he returned to the living room.

'Yes, Mr Shine?' the computer replied.

'Order another book about space for Eureka's birthday, would you?' he said as he lowered himself onto the sofa. 'I think our little one is working out who she wants to be in this world.'

'Certainly, Mr Shine,' the computer replied, selecting a beloved classic about a heroic captain fighting for what's right in the Andromeda galaxy. 'I know just the one.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

How Hard Can It Be?

LOCATION UNKNOWN | TIME UNKNOWN

In the darkness, Kez felt something new. A shift, a pulling. Instead of floating, she was being yanked, falling sideways, out of control.

'Oi, what you playing at?' said the first thing, its voice seemingly falling away.

'Get back here!' exclaimed the second.

The voices melted into the rushing nothing, as Kez gasped for a breath she couldn't possibly take.

Kez landed, sideways and at speed, causing her to roll straight off a metal landing pad and straight into a set of dark blue, open-topped barrels. They stopped her momentum by rocking in place and slopping some of their foul liquid contents on top of her.

'Owww,' Kez groaned from the floor, bruised and damp.

'You said it,' groaned the voice next to her.

Kez jumped to her feet as fast as her aching body could lift her. Thirty seconds later, she was finally upright. Wobbly, but upright, and standing in a room she did not recognise, with someone she did recognise by her feet.

'Iscah!' Kez exclaimed, reaching down to pull her up, no matter how much her muscles complained.

'Alright, Kez,' Iscah smiled, grateful for the help. 'I was worried for a second then. Didn't manage to pass Eureka's message on to you.'

'Eureka's message?'

'Yeah,' Iscah said, checking herself over for damage. 'She had a plan and needed us to allow ourselves to be sent back. Told me when we hugged. Bloody Austin stopped me before I could pass it on.'

'That wasn't Austin,' Kez mumbled offhandedly, taking in her surroundings.

The room was large, but suffocating thanks to the presence of some sort of machine right in the centre of it. The contraption was made up of a solid hexagonal base a few metres across, a large array of ceiling-

mounted devices pointing at it, and more exposed wiring than a naughty magazine for robots. All of it was old, technologically ancient, and rusting, like it had been untouched for decades.

'Where the hell are we?' Kez muttered as she stepped forward, triggering a sensor somewhere and causing a familiar shape to form, lighting the room with a pale green hue.

'Hello!' waved an ancient hologram of Eureka, projected life-size onto the hexagonal platform. 'If you're hearing this, I'm afraid you've probably missed us.'

Kez took a step forward, glancing up at the figure. Eureka was older, with thick creases scattered about her face, and long, silver hair tied back in a ponytail.

'I'm recording this in the year 2199,' Eureka's hologram continued. 'I made it back, obviously, and I found Lily. We've spent the last twenty-four years together, right here in this asteroid belt.'

Iscah glanced out of the one and only window. Outside, a handful of small rocks were slowly rotating in place.

'It's been fantastic, it really has. Just me, my girl, and life. We've kept out of the way as best we could, but from time to time, we've sneaked out. Six years ago we popped back to Earth, to watch the ceremony as we joined the Affinity. Oh, the crowds. The sheer fucking *hope* of it all. If you ever get a chance, pop back and—'

Eureka reacted to something invisible, off to the side of the camera. She nodded and carried on.

'Lily's telling me off,' she beamed. 'We don't want this message to run too long, as it'll be prone to corruption over the years.'

Eureka took a breath, gave her wife a glance for support, and got to the serious bit.

'You're standing in a time machine. Now, don't get excited, it's not as fancy as the one you're used to. All this can do is intercept you and put you back to where you came from. It's a return-to-sender machine if anything, but that doesn't sound as cool.'

Another note from offscreen. Kez couldn't help but smile at how happy Eureka looked.

'Right, you might not know this yet, but I'm sure Osheen isn't dead, and is involved with Austin Lang,' Eureka's hologram said, causing Iscah to gasp and Kez to nod in confirmation. 'I punched his corpse … don't ask … and I felt a disguise fizz in the same way yours did when I hit you. Sorry about that again. I'm sure he's up to something dodgy, so I took the opportunity to leave the moment I was offered it.

Hopefully, you did too.'

Not quite, grimaced Kez internally.

'I did swipe his dataflake on the way out,' Eureka smiled fiendishly, holding it up, then placing it down onto a nearby table where Kez noticed it continued to sit. 'That gave us the technical knowhow to bash all this together, and Osheen gave us the idea. He once told us that a blast of energy could naff up a temporal field, so this is looking for you all day, every day, ready to knock you off course so you end up here instead. Sure, it's like trying to attach a different length bungee cord to someone already half way through a jump, but it works! Hopefully …'

It does, Kez thought. She focused on this idea, hoping to send it back in time to where it would be appreciated. *You did it, Eureka.*

'Lastly,' Eureka continued. 'We have no idea when, or even if this thing will catch you two. Could be today, could be in hundreds of years. Chances are, we're dead and gone. If that's the case, I have a request …'

Eureka sighed. A disembodied hand put itself around her, squeezing her shoulders in comfort. 'I messed up with the *Paracosm*. My mistake killed a damn fine crew. If you make it back and twat that bastard, let the people know who I really was. Celebrate the crew, not me. That's all I want. For the *Paracosm* and its crew to be remembered properly.' The arm squeezed tighter as Eureka leaned into it.

'Thank you, Iscah, Kez. Good luck.'

The hologram faded, returning the room to its dull blue lighting.

'We'll remember you,' Iscah said softly, her words directed to the space where Eureka had just been standing.

'You've given the universe a fighting chance, Eureka,' Kez croaked. 'No matter what, *we will remember you*.'

Kez and Iscah began to sob as they took a moment to appreciate this incredible sacrifice. They embraced, sharing a hug between the only people who would ever truly know what Eureka Shine did for the universe, weeping painfully and openly.

'Should we tell them we're not dead?' Lily asked from the other side of the room, hidden behind a bank of processors.

'Give them another minute,' Eureka grinned back. 'I want to hear if they have anything else nice to say about me.'

As humans began to step into the vastness of space, shedding previously held notions of isolation and scarcity, the entire concept of life shifted for the individual. Instead of toiling at a job you couldn't give two shits about, so that a shareholder could afford yet another holiday to a resort where nobody knew how much of a bastard they were, you could request a spaceship from someone who loved making them, piss off into outer space, and do whatever you wanted. For Dale Dawson, this meant asteroid mining. With no people to pay attention to, no difficult social cues to adhere to, and two massive lasers strapped to each side of his tiny ship, Dale lived every day in a wonderful, silent, geological peace.[fn59]

As he whipped his ship around the offcuts of the universe today, a particular asteroid caught his eye. It was large, slightly off colour, and spun slower than its fellows. With a professional flick, Dale touched down onto it like a feather landing on a slightly larger feather, and flipped his favourite switch. Under his ship, the sonar activated, bouncing brief audio chirps into the rock to discover anything lying beneath the surface. Dale smiled, waiting to hear the results. Silver's ping was sharp, almost tangy to the ears. Gold was soft and dull, like an old, rusty gong coughing. Platinum was neat, orderly, like a battalion of tiny, earthy soldiers. Unfortunately for Dale, this asteroid housed a secret facility, and the results came back at the exact moment that two of the women inside it noticed the other two. He wasn't aware of this situation though, so, after hearing the results, he left in a hurry and moved to an entirely new section of the asteroid belt. It wasn't the first time an asteroid had given him an odd reading, but it was absolutely the first time that one had called him a cunt.

Kez, Iscah, Eureka, and Lily sat on uncomfortable chairs, catching each other up with every detail of the potential destruction of the universe, the temporal trickery of Austin Lang, now going by Osheen Shupple, and the seemingly endless amount of gossip that two lesbians in their seventies could muster out of thin air.

'Twenty-four years in this place,' Kez whistled, glancing around at what she correctly assumed was the majority of their secret base. 'I can't imagine it.'

'You get used to it,' Lily nodded, her red hair had thinned, but was still wild and unpredictable. One eye was heavily bandaged, a casualty

of the nomadic lifestyle. ‘It’s home.’

‘Remember that abandoned research station we tried to live in first?’ Eureka said, smiling at the memory. ‘It was in orbit around Phobos so we had some spectacular views. Shame it didn’t last.’

‘Why’s that?’ Iscah asked.

‘We fucked it out of orbit,’ Lily said matter-of-factly.

‘LILY!’ Eureka gasped, her cheeks matching the colour of her wife’s hair as Kez and Iscah fell about laughing.

‘That should be on the plaques,’ laughed Iscah, wiping a tear from her eye. ‘Think of the statues!’

‘I don’t even know how that would work,’ snorted Kez. The room turned to her, all of them seemingly amused.

‘What?’

‘Oh, *sweetie*,’ Eureka said sympathetically, causing Lily and Iscah to break.

‘I’ve been studying!’ Kez exclaimed over the laughter. ‘There’s not much time for … anything like that.’

Nah, said a familiar voice in Kez’s ear. *You’ve just got no game.*

‘E-NA!’ Kez exclaimed, launching herself to her feet. With a flick of her eyes, Kez connected to the local station software, allowing E-NA to be heard by everyone.

‘Hey, all,’ E-NA said, her voice projecting from a handful of speakers. ‘Nice to finally meet you.’

‘Is this one of those AI people?’ Lily asked, fascinated. ‘She sounds so lifelike.’

‘Steady on, carbon,’ E-NA chuckled. ‘Pleasure to meet you too.’

‘You have a Compat living in your NPC?’ Iscah asked. ‘Remarkable.’

‘Nope,’ said a new voice, emerging from the same speakers as E-NA. ‘She has two!’

‘Bea!’ Eureka, Iscah, and Kez yelled in unison.

‘In the molybdenum disulfide!’

‘Anyone want to explain to me why it’s turned into a sitcom in here?’ Lily complained gently.

‘I’m here because Kez and I modified me to fit onto an NPC, or *brain computer*,’ E-NA said, trying to not chuckle. ‘Bea here is a rescue. Managed to download her before Osheen wrote her off. Don’t worry, I’ve had her spayed. Well, I’ve ripped Osheen’s hacky coding out of her. Same thing.’

‘Well, this explains the headaches,’ Kez said, updating her painkiller apps. ‘I thought you’d vanished again.’

‘Vanished?’ E-NA exclaimed, hurt. ‘I was fighting to keep Osheen out of your head. The moment we got back from the twenty-first century he was trying to take control of you. Sorry I didn’t have the processing power to run my chit-chat algorithm.’

‘I want one,’ Lily whispered, elbowing Eureka gently. ‘Think of all the arguments I could have without the need to bother you.’

‘Christmas,’ Eureka winked back.

‘So you heard everything that went on?’ Kez asked.

‘Yeah,’ said E-NA calmly. ‘Harker and I were trying to track down Austin, which would explain why I had no memories of the mission. The moment I reconnected to the Affinity, that damn virus would have wiped all knowledge of Austin out of my mind.’

‘We’ll find her,’ Kez said, her voice breaking, revealing a lack of faith in herself.

‘Well, bugger this place then,’ Eureka said, standing up and folding her chair neatly against a wall. ‘Let’s get going.’

‘I’ll fire up the machine,’ said Lily, throwing her chair at Eureka’s, catching her eye and smirking at her frown. Kez didn’t stand, instead opting to stay in her seat and look like a deer as an entire concert-sized lighting rig fell on them.

‘You’re coming with us?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ laughed Eureka. ‘If you’ll have us. Did I not mention that in the recording?’

‘You were too busy showing off our holiday snaps,’ Lily tutted before explaining. ‘We’re going to piggyback your temporal signature and ping ourselves across time with you.’

‘Is that … safe?’ Kez asked.

‘Should be,’ said Lily, kicking a panel to expose some switches. ‘If that asshole who wrote the dataflake was good at maths, we’re looking at ninety-nine per cent accuracy.’

‘I feel like ninety-nine per cent of the way between here and a small station between galaxies would be … cold,’ said Iscah.

‘Ninety-nine per cent of the way time-wise,’ said Eureka. ‘We should land in the lower decks of *Lucas*’s living quarters, but could arrive a decade either way.’

‘So we could turn up before any of this happened?’ said Kez. ‘We could be the ones with the intel for once.’

‘Or too late to do anything,’ shrugged Lily.

‘Oi,’ said Eureka. ‘We’re going to nail this.’

‘Well, let’s see,’ said Lily. ‘On one side, an immortal genius, hell bent

on taking control of the universe, not to mention an army of mind-controlled minions the size of literally everyone. On the other, us four, two of whom are one bad fall away from snuffing it, one a woman having a crisis of faith, and one so fresh out of school she still has spit balls drying in her hair.'

'I wouldn't say it was a crisis …' Iscah mumbled to herself. 'I'd just quite like to not feel, you know, abandoned.'

Lily jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the return-to-sender device.

'Does this miracle not count?' she chuckled. 'What else are you waiting for? Two boats and a shuttle?'

'I think that's more a sign than a miracle,' corrected Eureka.

'What's a miracle then?' Lily asked.

'Something inexplicable.'

'Oh,' said Lily. 'Like how we made it through the menopause while living in this tiny asteroid without killing each other.'

'Yeah,' nodded Eureka, pecking her wife on the cheek. 'That's one.'

'Iscah,' said Kez quietly, shaking off that conversation. 'When Osheen changed the note to his past self, when he started all of this, he destroyed the original universe. You haven't been singled out, because nobody in this room was from that universe. Not a single one of us is the original.'

'Doesn't that terrify you?' asked Iscah.

'Should it?' replied Kez.

'Yeah, it fucking should!' exclaimed Iscah. 'How can you ground yourself if you don't even know what real is?'

Eureka pulled her chair back over to Iscah.

'Say you woke up in a city you didn't recognise, with no memory of how you arrived,' she said softly. 'In front of you, a building is on fire. What's the first thing you would do?'

'I'd see if anyone inside needed help,' shrugged Iscah.

'You'd help,' nodded Eureka. 'It doesn't matter where you are, or what's going on. That's your instinct. That's who you are. You'd help.'

Eureka took Iscah's hands in hers.

'That place you found yourself might be a dream, a simulation, a trick. You didn't consider any of that, because reality isn't actually what's important. Reality doesn't matter. What matters to you, to Iscah, is that someone might need help.'

'Are you trying to cheer me up with nihilism?' Iscah smiled softly. 'Bold play.'

'Absurdism,' corrected Eureka. 'The idea that life is meaningless

doesn't mean that you might as well waste it. Life being meaningless is *liberating*. It allows you to find and assign value, to hold close what you love. It's like being given a blank canvas. Sure, you could be cynical and pessimistic, complaining that it's white and featureless. Or, you can get some paints out, dab some colour on there, and give it some fucking meaning.'

Iscah started to speak, but felt a small flicker inside herself. A spark. One she hadn't felt for a long time. It was faint, but it was there.

'What I'm saying is that you shouldn't ground yourself on something as flimsy as reality. Ground yourself on the only tangible thing you can ever know. Ground yourself on *you*.'

Iscah breathed slowly, each breath causing the spark inside to grow stronger.

'I help people,' she whispered.

'Yeah you do,' Eureka smiled, patting her on the shoulder and putting her chair away again. 'Right then, just to double check. Lily, you good to go?'

'Hell yes, Captain Sweetie,' Lily replied, causing Eureka to blush.

'Iscah?'

'Count me in,' she nodded, leaping to her feet.

'Finally, Kez?'

'Can I … not go?' she asked quietly.

Iscah, Eureka, and Lily turned to Kez, still in her seat, staring at the floor. 'I don't want to go back there,' she said, looking up at the trio, tears in her eyes. 'I don't think I can.'

'Oh, hon,' Eureka said, as she and Lily knelt down beside her. 'That's fine.'

'Really?' Kez asked, her throat burning.

'Really,' said Lily, running a hand through Kez's hair. 'We just need to send something back to satisfy the signal. Doesn't have to be you.'

The four of them fell into a warm hug, as Kez sobbed, sandwiched between the three of them. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered in between breaths.

'You've got nothing to be sorry about,' said Lily. 'You've been through the wars. It's OK to want to stop.'

It's not, said a small voice in Kez's head. It wasn't E-NA.

'Eureka and I are more than enough for Osheen to handle,' Lily chuckled.

They'll die, said the voice. *All of them. Everyone.*

'Don't you worry,' Eureka said. 'We've got it covered.'

They'll fail and you know it.

Kez buried herself into the hug further, trying to muffle her conscience. Inside, a heat crashed about, tearing away at her. She wanted to scream and be silent at the same time.

Dad would be so disappointed in you.

'Stop being so *nice*!' Kez yelled, pushing Eureka away. 'On our first mission, I abandoned you. I left you *all* to die.'

Eureka and Lily knelt in a stunned silence. Lily shot her wife a glance, but Eureka didn't see it, her eyes not leaving Kez's.

'I was scared, I panicked, and I didn't want to die,' Kez stammered. 'I had the beacon and … If that bubble hadn't expanded …'

'It's OK, Kez,' said Eureka.

'I betrayed you,' yelled Kez, angry at the lack of reaction. 'Don't you care?'

'I don't,' said Eureka. 'You didn't do it with maliciousness, there was no spite. You were scared, and you made a mistake.'

'I was a coward!' Kez yelled, leaping to her feet.

'So was I,' Eureka snapped, slowly climbing back up to her full height. 'I know how you feel.'

'You have no clue how I …'

Kez tailed off, remembering who she was talking to. As the two of them stood silently, Lily patted Eureka on the shoulder and left, taking Iscah and the Compats with her, allowing the two of them to talk.

'My mistakes killed people,' Eureka said softly, taking Kez's hand in hers. 'Brilliant, beautiful people died under my command. I couldn't even say sorry to their families.'

'That's different—' Kez began.

'Not in how it affects us,' Eureka said sharply, derailing that train of thought that she knew all too well.

'I just want to fix it,' said Kez. 'Put it all back.'

'We can't,' smiled Eureka. 'You and I know that more than anyone. It's taken me decades to realise this, but all we can do is move forward, accepting the mistakes we made and promising ourselves that we'll never make them again.'

Kez took a moment, letting this thought roll about in her mind, Eureka's wrinkled face adding weight to it.

'Where you stand, right now, is you. *This* is you, so tell me. *Who is Kez*?'

Kez didn't answer. She didn't know. Her entire life up to this point had been orchestrated by a madman, hell bent on taking total control

of a universe. Her universe. The one her dad lived in, the one her mum vanished into. How could she possibly know who she was? She hadn't been given the chance to find out yet.

'I don't know,' she eventually muttered.

'Bullshit,' said Eureka, grabbing Kez by the side of the head and locking eyes with her. 'Who is Kezia? What does she believe in?'

Kez looked deeply into Eureka's blue eyes. Their colour was slightly faded since the last time they met, but the fire burned as bright as ever. The fire of a good person trying their hardest to make a difference. Before she could stop herself, something loosened up inside Kez. A shackle cracked and fell away. A thought escaped.

'She doesn't trust people,' Kez said quietly.

'Why?' asked Eureka.

'They're like me,' said Kez. 'I wouldn't trust me.'

'I trust you,' Eureka said with a smile.

'I betrayed you.'

'You going to do that again?'

Kez pulled away slightly, part of her upset by the question.

'No,' she said. 'Never.'

'Then why shouldn't I trust you?'

Another shackle opened. Another long-held thought bobbed to the surface, raw and delicate.

'When Mum vanished, nobody told me anything. I thought they were keeping things from me, lying to me. It was easier to believe that than the alternative.'

'The alternative?' Eureka asked.

'That nobody really knew where Mum was. So, I stopped trusting. Started lying, cheating. Eventually I became the person I thought everyone else was.'

Kez slowly pulled Eureka's hands from her face.

'That's who Kez is,' she concluded. 'She's everything I hate.'

Behind Eureka, a spanner crashed off the ground, shattering the mood. 'Sorry,' said Lily, her blushing skin matching her hair as she went back to work. Eureka smiled warmly and shook her head.

'She picks her moments well,' Eureka chuckled.

'I can't believe you'd risk losing each other over this,' Kez said.

'This is the end of reality we're talking about,' Eureka said. 'That just about usurps our marriage.'

Behind her, Lily shook her head. 'This is why Mother said to not marry a hero,' she sighed, handing Iscah a bunch of cabling. 'I should

have listened.'

'I'm no hero,' said Eureka.

'Excuse me?' Kez said, taken aback. 'You clearly are! You're about to dive head first into the path of a crazy person, just to save a future full of people you don't even know!'

'That's not how I see it,' muttered Eureka.

'Just because you don't see yourself as a hero, doesn't mean …'

Kez trailed off as separate ideas crashed into each other at speed, like they'd just been flung around a collider.

'Gottcha,' Eureka smiled. 'The only thing stopping you being who you want to be is you. Sure, you've made mistakes in the past, but the past is gone. It's who you will be today, that's what's important.'

An unfamiliar sensation spread out from Kez's chest, running across her body and down into her fingers. It was warm.

'So,' Eureka continued. 'For the last time … Who is Kezia?'

Kez clenched her hands into tight fists and took a long, slow breath. 'What's the plan?' she asked.

'Attagirl,' said Eureka. 'Remember that stasis field that Iscah arrived in? Well, according to the dataflake, it's Osheen's! It must be on *Lucas*, so what we'll do is …'

Kez wasn't listening, instead she was replaying a fleeting memory over and over again. A cube, sailing over her shoulder, shattering irreparably behind her. 'Ah,' she said, in that way that always leads up to someone having a bad day. 'I broke that.'

A pipe behind Lily whined slightly, earning it a thump.

'Right,' said Eureka, disheartened. 'Well, that idea took us two decades so … any other suggestions?'

Kez scrunched up her brain to think. All the pieces of the puzzle floated around her, bouncing off each other, nothing connecting.

'All we've got to do is work out how to kill an unkillable guy,' shrugged Lily. 'Shouldn't be too hard.'

'We don't need to kill him,' Kez said, remembering her trip to see Austin. 'He's already dead.'

'Oh, why didn't you say so,' said Lily, putting her gun away with as much sarcasm as she could.

'Osheen exists in two states,' said Kez. 'One living, one dead. Whichever state he's observed in, he's locked into.'

Eureka snapped her fingers. 'So if we could observe only his dead state, he'd be dead,' she said. 'Can't control the universe if he's dead.'

'You mentioned that his body was in an urn,' said Iscah. 'If we find

that, observe it without observing him, he's toast.'

Eureka was lost in thought, a cold finger running over her own slightly fuzzy upper lip. 'It's dangerous,' she whispered. 'Either he's moved the urn, or it's in the room he spends most of his time in.'

'We could wait until he's asleep maybe,' shrugged Kez. 'Or on the bog?'

'Did you ever see him sleep?' asked Iscah. 'Or eat? Breathe? He might not have any normal functions we can rely on.'

'Immortality but you can't take a piss?' scoffed Lily. 'Not worth it.'

'On that note,' said Kez, realising that this was her last chance for hundreds of years. 'Bathroom?'

'Out there, through the bedroom, little thin silver door on the left,' said Eureka.

'I'll get in on that action,' Iscah said, following Kez. 'We don't have time for a nap too do we?'

'Oh, a nap would be incredible right now,' lied Kez. A nap for her would be nothing but a trojan horse for the real, fourteen hours of uninterrupted sleep that her body desperately needed.

'Afraid not,' said Lily. 'We've only got about fifteen minutes before this machine will need to fire, or we'll be scattered to the cosmos when we use it.'

'Best not then,' Iscah grumbled, as she and Kez left the room.

'That's a new one on me,' Eureka said, hands on hips accusatorially. 'Fifteen minutes?'

'You know I just can't stand waiting for people.' Lily shrugged, earning her arm a thump.

Silently, the two women packed up their lives. Lily pulled a photograph from a frame, Eureka pocketed a see-through pen covered with faded stars.

'Am I doing it again?' asked Eureka. 'Marching more brilliant people to their death?'

'Hey now,' said Lily, plugging some cables together. 'She's got us in her corner.'

Eureka shook her head. 'I don't know how she survives this,' she said.

'I once said the same about you,' Lily said softly, walking over and holding hands with her wife. 'As I watched a starship explode from the window of an escape pod.'

'This is different,' said Eureka. 'Like she said, her death is pre-determined. It's—'

‘Impossible?’ offered Lily. ‘Ludicrous? Bonkers? Paradoxical? Hopeless? Come on, Eureka, which word that you regularly ignore the meaning of do you want to assign to this situation?’

Eureka smiled, watching her wife’s hands slam into her hips.

‘You know, you don’t have to—’

‘Oh my god, you’re a hero, we get it,’ Lily giggled, strapping a watch around her wrist. ‘I’m taking this by the way.’

‘Dad’s watch?’

‘It brought you home last time,’ Lily said. ‘It’s going to do it again. Now, say it.’

‘Say what?’ Eureka asked, eyes narrowing.

‘Say it. In case the watch doesn’t work.’

‘No,’ said Eureka. ‘We’ll make it back fine and afterwards—’

Lily stepped up towards Eureka, barely an inch from her face.

‘Just say it, you bell-end,’ she whispered.

‘Goodbye, Lily,’ said Eureka. ‘This was brilliant.’

‘Bye, love,’ said Lily as they kissed, possibly for the last time.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

How Hard It Can Be

LUCAS | TIME UNKNOWN

A rift formed somewhere and somewhen in the universe, spitting Lily out onto a cold, hard floor. 'If anyone wants to be a dear and pick me up, now would be the time,' she groaned, her view of the room she was in obscured by a nest of her own hair. When nobody replied, she sat up.

'Eureka?' she asked, her voice echoing around the dark, silent room. She scurried to her feet, slowly backing up until she bumped into a control panel, opening the shutters that adorned the window behind her. With a series of clacks, the shutters rose, one by one, revealing the voracious black hole outside.

Right place, Lily thought as she watched a spiral of light being perpetually torn from the universe.

A small yellow robot shot past the window, causing Lily to duck out of sight. This was followed by another, which was followed by about forty more. The entire station shook as it ground to a halt, and the fleet of robots got to work attaching it to the colossal frame that encompassed the black hole.

Shit, Lily sighed. *Wrong time.*

LUCAS | TIME UNKNOWN

A rift silently opened, vomiting Kez onto the floor of an empty room as it wobbled about across dimensions. She scrambled upright, just about dodging Iscah as she fell out too.

'We're back,' Kez said, helping Iscah up and taking in her surroundings. This was definitely *Lucas*, just not a room she recognised.

'Right time too,' said Iscah, glancing out the window. 'Ipricus has retreated and the *Omphalos* is still here.'

No control signals heading your way, E-NA said. *You OK if Bea and I get to work?*

Kez nodded, watching as the two Compats uploaded themselves, ready to infiltrate the computer core of *Lucas*.

With a silent ripple, the rift shuddered, flickered, and faded slightly before a third body hit the deck. Iscah was on Eureka in seconds, helping her up.

'Just us?' she asked, looking around, hoping that somehow Lily had concealed herself in a room with as many hiding places as a desert runway.

'For now,' Kez said, eyes tied to the sputtering rift.

With a final shake and a shudder, the rift snapped shut, leaving the breathless women without any form of Scottish backup.

'Again?' Eureka whispered, her heart breaking. 'The universe must be jealous of us, only explanat— what is that *smell*?'

LUCAS | Time Unknown

To discover exactly how early she was, Lily decided to find a computer of some sort. A quick nip into an equally dark hallway revealed what she was looking for, a wall panel with many glowing lights. She walked over, briefly trying to maintain a level of stealth, but deciding to give up on that after her shin came into contact with a metal crate and a loud expletive gave her position away to any potential villains. *Right then*, Lily thought, jabbing buttons on the machine. *How do I work this?*

Lily, while adept with the technology of the 2100s, had incorrectly assumed that she would be equally adept with the technology of the 2700s, despite it being the equivalent of asking a fifteenth-century expert on the printing press to send an email.

Luckily for Lily, one particular jab did display the current date, letting her know that she'd undershot her target by roughly six years. Unluckily for Lily, the rest of the button jabs had caused the machine in question, a food printer, to do what any good machine would do: as it was told. It took the commands to synthesise an infinite amount of a particular kind of food, didn't question them in the slightest, and got to work making that happen, much to the horror of its user.

LUCAS | 2783

Kez clasped her hands over her mouth, but too late. A waft of foul-smelling air was already severely testing her gag reflex.

'This must be the fifth floor,' Iscah coughed. 'The one blocked off due to "contamination".'

'I wonder why?' Kez sputtered. This was like being in space again, only with less breathable air.

'Where is that coming from?' Eureka gasped, looking around the small room. The only feature of note was a tatty-looking pool table, under which the red carpet had given up attempting to lie flat. 'Is this where he's hiding the bodies?'

'Let's get out of here,' Iscah said, pelting over to the only door, a foul wind vortexing behind her. With a tap of a panel the door opened, causing the smell to worsen a hundredfold.

'Fucking fuckedy fuck,' Kez exclaimed, pressing against her nose so hard that she was in danger of breaking it. 'It smells like death died.'

Eureka, face buried firmly in the crook of her elbow, pointed awkwardly at the remains of a food printer at the end of the hallway, underneath which an enormous pile of mulch lay, rotting into the wet carpet. The printer itself had clearly been the victim of a thoroughly deserved beating, with twelve dents adorning its face; most likely an unsuccessful attempt to stop it.

'Here,' Iscah said, forcing open a door that led to the main staircase. Kez and Eureka didn't miss a beat, nipping through the small gap before the door slammed airtight behind them again, its glowing 'CONTAMINATED' sign reforming behind them.

'Surströmming!' Eureka sputtered. 'What a program to get stuck in a loop.'

Kez shrugged, wanting to know more, but trying very hard not to vomit heavily.

'Fermented herring,' said Eureka, savouring each breath of stale air like it was a fine wine. 'Had some back on Earth once. It smells like pickled anguish, but it actually tastes alright.'

'I'll have to try it some time,' Kez said, making a mental note to never, ever try it some time.

'Right, I assume Bea and E-NA are already hardware-side,' said Iscah. 'Once they've tracked down Osheen and the urn, what's the play?'

'I don't have one,' smiled Eureka. Kez slumped against the door.

'You what?' she whined.

'I figured he'd be expecting a plan, so this way we'll have the

element of surprise on our hands.'

Kez tried to reply without swearing. She really did.

'What the fu—'

'Actually, that's sort of brilliant,' interrupted Iscah. 'He's spent centuries with everything going his way. A little injection of chaos might be exactly what we need.'

Kez slumped further down the door.

LUCAS | 2777

Lily slumped against the wall, her eleventh and final kick to the already heavily dented body of the food printer failing to make it stop. With an almost irritated creak, the wounded food printer carried on constructing the rotten fish it had been programmed to. It finished its latest and dropped it into the wonky tray below, causing it to slide sadly onto the carpet.

'Why won't you die?' Lily breathlessly asked the machine, exhausted. The rules for time travel that Eureka had drummed into her over the years never said anything about picking a fight with a machine that can create more fish than would be needed for a biblical meetup. In her defence, the phrase Eureka was fond of using was 'leave only footprints', which she had. Nearly a dozen of them, dented into the machine's face.

To her side, the door to the corridor opened, breaking several more of Eureka's rules. In marched a colossal figure, the orange glow from his body lighting the corridor around him until he flicked a nearby switch, flooding it with light. He growled as he stomped past Lily, bent down to inspect the food printer, then turned back to her, growling harder. Lily's heart leapt into her throat where it began choking her in a panic.

'Don't tell me my translator is on the blink too?' Alphonse sighed, switching from his native tongue to Human. 'Does anything work on this shitheap?'

He turned and banged a ruddy great fist against the food printer, causing the half-assembled fish to slip out of the little robot arms and drop to the floor, landing with a revolting squish.

'Well that's off-putting,' he said, shaking his head and then the hand of Lily. 'Alphonse. Head of security as of today. What are you regretting giving up for this, and can it beat a captaincy?'

‘Patsy,’ Lily said, remembering her prepared name and backstory. ‘I’m only visiting. Affinity health and safety inspector. Spot-check.’

‘Sounds like a job that would be easier with the lights on,’ Alphonse chuckled, making his hundredth mental note of the day so far, this one to obtain a list of all visiting personnel.

‘They’ve been fluctuating,’ said Lily. ‘I’ve seen worse, but not many.’

‘I believe that,’ said Alphonse, throwing a sideways glance at the battered food printer and jotting down another reminder internally, this time to tell the engineer to kill power to the printer when he arrived. ‘Have you noticed the hundred-year-out-of-date thruster fuel that the spacesuits have in them?’

‘I must have missed that,’ Lily said, admitting this fact to prevent a gamble.

‘It’s volatile as all hell,’ Alphonse said. ‘Someone seems to have distilled bombs down to a thick goo, and there’s a glob of it by each floor’s airlock. If I sneeze by one, it’s over.’

Alphonse sighed. From what he had seen of Osheen so far, these potential threats to life weren’t getting replaced in a hurry. ‘Anything major to report?’ he asked gingerly. ‘Or at least, anything that a head of security can understand?’

‘On this floor, a couple of hull fissures and a radiation leak,’ said Lily, hoping the random technobabble she was spouting made sense.

‘Damn,’ Alphonse said, shaking his head. ‘I’ll shut this level down for now. Anything else?’

‘That’s all I have for now,’ Lily said, looking around to seem more legitimate. ‘However, I need to do an outbound matter courier check.’

‘Then I’ll escort you halfway,’ Alphonse smiled, indicating the way with a thick arm. ‘I’m starving, and if that food printer on the fourth floor doesn’t work, I’m going to throw myself into the black hole.’

Lily chuckled, half at the joke and half at her own luck, as she and Alphonse began their short journey. ‘You could always cook yourself something,’ Lily suggested.

‘Nah, I’ve never made a meal from scratch before,’ said Alphonse as they began to climb the stairs. ‘It just doesn’t really sound like my kind of thing.’

LUCAS | 2783

‘Alphonse is here,’ Kez said, drawing a map on the wall with the

information that E-NA and Bea were sending her. ‘Osheen and Morag are over there. Malcolm is down in engineering, and my dad isn’t onboard anymore. It’s just the four of them.’

Eureka and Iscah studied the diagram of Osheen’s office intensely, letting no detail slip them by. Osheen was sat at his desk, likely working, while Morag was deployed next to him, likely unblinking, his replacement for Bea. Meanwhile, by the door at the other side of the room, Alphonse stood to attention, ready to defend Osheen at a moment’s notice.

‘Where’s the urn?’ Iscah asked, watching Kez’s eyes flick around as the answers were fed to her.

‘Alphonse is holding it,’ she said eventually, adding the information with Eureka’s star pen. ‘He’s also got unbreakable orders to kill any of us on sight. Osheen’s taking no chances.’

‘Shit,’ Eureka muttered. ‘So, how are we going to take it from Paul Bearer?’

Kez and Iscah looked at Eureka, their faces scrunching up quizzically.

‘Please tell me you still have professional wrestling in the future,’ she said, eyes slightly panicking.

‘Focus,’ muttered Kez, gazing up at the drawing while E-NA and Bea whispered secrets to her.

Eureka sighed sadly, before Iscah tapped her on the shoulder. She raised her fists until they were level with her head, extended her index fingers upwards, and proceeded to move her arms up and down, mouthing the word ‘Yes’.[fn60]

‘Oh, brilliant,’ said a relieved Eureka, clapping a hand against her own chest. ‘You had me worried for a second then.’

‘Focus, *both of you*,’ Kez hissed. ‘I think I’ve got an idea.’

‘I thought we weren’t doing plans,’ said Eureka.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Kez, eyeing the nearby airlock, the spacesuit hanging by it, and a thruster pack filled with an incredibly volatile fuel. ‘It’s a bad one.’

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND | 2777

‘Nah,’ Lily said, sliding away the image of a property on a barely inhabited planet. ‘I’m pretty sick of airlocks.’

‘Fair enough,’ replied the Affinity employee behind the desk. ‘We

want you to be happy in your home.'

Lily looked again at the information that was scrolling across the desk in front of her. A list of every single house, apartment, and living quarters in the galaxy, organisable and searchable by location, square footage, and preferred views. 'Just to check again, these are all free?' Lily asked defensively, glancing around for cameras that might be filming her for some sort of futuristic prank show. Instead, she spotted her own reflection on a nearby surface. Either she was filthy, or it was.

'Of course,' the Affinity employee, Clive according to his badge, beamed. 'Oh, is there a chance you are from a border world?'

Lily nodded. It felt right.

'Forgive me,' Clive sighed, placing a hand over his heart. 'I should have realised. Don't worry, I'll set you up with everything you need.'

'For … free?' Lily asked again, her working eye narrowing in an attempt to see through any potential ruse. Clive smiled, eyes flicking across screens that Lily couldn't see.

'Alright, Patsy was it?'

'Yeah,' Lily said.

'Lovely,' nodded Clive. 'Surname?'

Shit, Lily thought, desperately trying to remember her fictional identity. *What was it again?*

'It's fine if you don't have one,' said Clive, excitedly flicking through forms he didn't get to use often. 'I can register you without one and, if you'd like, include information on how to select one into your welcome pack.'

Lily nodded, briefly wondering if Eureka would be annoyed if she went back to her maiden name. This thought didn't linger, as suddenly one of the scrolling living spaces caught Lily's eye. A cosy, fire-lit apartment by the waterside, a good fit for a single occupant, and in the most beautiful place Lily had ever seen.

'Can I have that one?!' she blurted, jabbing at the desk. Clive paused his form work, looked down at the house, back up at Lily, beamed, and went back to his forms again.

'We can sort that out for you, no trouble,' he smiled. 'Now, when would you like to book your NPC insertion procedure for?'

'Oh, I don't want one,' Lily said as nonchalantly as she could. 'Not for me.'

'Are you sure?' Clive said. 'The benefits outweigh the small surgical —'

'I said no,' Lily stated firmly. 'Thank you, but no.'

‘Well, I’ll put some information about the procedure into your welcome pack,’ Clive continued, unfazed. ‘Is there anything else I can help you with today?’

Clive held his smile, but something was different about it, like his eyes didn’t believe in it. As he finalised her paperwork, Lily wondered if he was even a part of this conversation anymore.

LUCAS | 2783

Inside Alphonse’s body, the real Alphonse was climbing the walls.

Scratch it, he whispered to his kidnapped body. *Go on, scratch it.*

With every fibre of his being, he focused on the small itch that was forming between two of his leg plates. A little bubble of magma had formed, cooled, and was now digging into his body. It was uncomfortable, but more importantly, fixable. A little scratch would break it apart, ending the agony of the itch.

Come on, he muttered from behind his own eyes. *That must be driving you mad. I know I want nothing more than to scratch it. How about you, parasite?*

With a grunt of displeasure, Alphonse’s body bent down slightly to scratch. The moment his muscles engaged, Alphonse rushed his own neurons, adding to the commands, pressing them harder and faster, and causing his body to pitch forward a little too fast and stumble slightly.

Further than last time, he smirked into his own mind as his body reset its position. *You’re losing this battle.*

‘Careful, you moron,’ Osheen spat from his desk. ‘That urn’s no good to me if you squash it.’

Alphonse nodded, returning to the perfect posture he’d been standing in for the past twelve hours. As he straightened, he noticed something outside the window behind Osheen. A figure.

Kez?

Kez knocked on the window, her spacesuit and thick glass muffling the noise, but Alphonse’s confused expression was enough to garner Osheen’s attention. He turned, gasping when he spotted the visitor.

‘Hey, asshole,’ Kez grinned silently. ‘Missed me?’

LEITH, SCOTLAND | 2780

'Miss you,' Lily said to the small photograph of Eureka that sat on her desk. She offered it a tiny smile, then stood, dragging the heavy tome she was reading away from the rigidity of her desk, and towards the comfort of her window seat. As she got comfortable, with pillows arranged to keep her upright and a soft tartan blanket thrown over her legs, Lily watched the night pass by outside her house. The rain was pouring, as it often was, and soaking the perpetually dirty bricks of the pub opposite, from which spilled the Scottish trinity of light, laughter, and the laced. She sighed happily and returned to her book, a slender finger marking the part she was struggling with: *Chapter 7: Packet architecture of NPC visual monitoring.*

Lily sighed less happily.

'I think you've done this on purpose,' she snapped over at the photo on the desk. 'You know how much I hate waiting for people.'

With that, she popped the cap off her highlighter and got to work drawing a cobweb in the corner of her textbook, desperate to fling herself out of the window and embrace the greatest culture in the world.

LUCAS | 2783

Pages of hastily put together code activated, causing Alphonse's body to hunch down and suddenly spring forward, bounding towards the window, the urn crashing to the floor as he moved.

KEZ! Alphonse cried from inside his own body, one he could feel was hell bent on slaughtering her.

Outside, Kez kicked away from the window, punting herself into space and hoping that Eureka was ready with the teleporter.

'NO!' Osheen screamed as Morag's arms elongated, throwing him to one side, out of trample range.

As Alphonse's body curled into its final leap, the real him focused his thoughts onto tightening his own viscous muscles, locking as many as he could in place. His left side screamed at the window while his right stiffened, pinging his body wildly off course and causing his thick skull to collide with the much, much thicker window frame. His growing body crashed through the diamond nanothread window, but by the time he was in space, he was far too unconscious to do any murdering.

The contents of Osheen's room left pretty sharpish after that. Books, furniture, and people were blown out into space, most of them spinning wildly. Kez caught a glimpse of her target, glinting gold as it flew towards her. She activated her suit thrusters, dodging awkwardly between potted plants, rugs, and awards, managing to snatch it out of the nothing.

She didn't have it for long. A robotic arm wrapped around it as Morag's NPC forced her to defend her target. With one arm on the urn, another bolted to the station, and a third grasping a suffocating Osheen by a leg, she began to pull, dragging Kez back towards the station.

Kez fired her thrusters, but to no avail. If only she could pull the urn a few metres further, then it would be out of the range of the transporter blocker, which would allow Eureka to teleport it away. She just needed Morag to lose focus for a second.

Oh, she thought to herself, as an idea sparked through her right hemisphere. *That could work.*

With a flick of a suited hand, Kez popped the top off the urn and peered inside. The corpse flickered, as presumably did Osheen, causing Morag to lose her grip on him as he fell between states of existence. Kez took the advantage, punching the bottom of the urn and tearing away with it after it popped out of Morag's grasp. Morag stretched for it, but Kez was now out of range.

'I have it,' Kez reported back to Eureka. 'Be ready to—'

Kez didn't finish her sentence as suddenly everything vanished. *Lucas*, the black hole, even the Milky Way had disappeared, leaving her in total darkness. After a moment, Kez's back hit something hard. It felt like a wall, one made of rock.

Uh oh.

The cave Kez found herself in cracked open, revealing a monstrous, rocky creature bearing down on her. Alphonse, now the size of the entire station, had her in his grasp. His fist closed again, allowing Kez to panic for two seconds before he started to shake it, cracking Kez between his palm and fingers at speed, forcing her to release the urn and breaking three bones in the process. Eventually he opened his fist again, allowing Kez's limp body and the urn to slowly part ways, before he grabbed her and threw her away from the station, into the empty void of space. Job done, he shrank back down, reclaimed his asset, and used carefully timed vent releases to propel himself back into Osheen's office. As he landed, Morag activated the emergency

shielding, restoring breathable air to the room.

'Did you deal with her?' Osheen asked, shaken but otherwise fine, his body showing no signs of the ordeal.

'I did,' Alphonse said, placing the urn down onto one of the few remaining shelves and watching as Osheen was set upon by Morag, medical equipment waving in every direction.

'Good,' said Osheen, waving Morag away before suddenly screaming in pain and flickering wildly.

Confused, Alphonse looked down at the urn in his hands, only to realise that it wasn't there. He rolled the last few moments back in his mind. First, he'd made a mess of his defenestration. Then, he'd missed the black hole by miles when he threw Kez. Now, he'd lost the urn without realising. What was going on?

He turned, just in time to see a quick glimpse of Iscah scampering away and the door sliding shut. He started to bulk up, but a robotic arm hit him in the chest.

'I'll go,' Morag said. 'Iscah's late for her examination.'

With that she burst out of the room, ready to slice Iscah into ribbons.

THE HELIX NEBULA | 2783

Lily coughed, causing the woman she had coughed at to swivel her attention back to her exam.

'Sorry,' the woman mouthed, before pointing towards the bathroom at the back of the hall. Lily nodded, angrily.

Come on, Kez, she muttered into her bank of monitors. *You're five hours in and have barely started. What are you waiting for?*

Kez answered about thirty minutes later, when she triggered about forty-seven separate cheating flags. Lily grinned, her face lit up by red warning messages.

You little shit, Lily thought as she set about cancelling the flags and deleting the logs. *No wonder Eureka likes you.*

SPACE | 2783

On the bright side, Kez thought as she floated away from *Lucas*. *At least*

I'm in a suit this time.

She tried to move her right arm, before a bolt of agony asked her impolitely not to. She ran a quick self-diagnostic. A broken ulna and a couple of shattered ribs. Terrific.

More concerning was the dark brown goo that was travelling with her. She ran her glove through it, testing its tackiness by pulling her fingers apart. *Thruster fuel*, she sighed, yanking the pack off her back to inspect the damage. A colossal tear through the metal was all she needed to see to know it was irreparable.

'Kez overboard,' she said, broadcasting the message back to *Lucas* and hoping that her suit was still in comms range. 'Wouldn't mind a lift from these coordinates.'

Her location shared, Kez floated silently through the cosmos. Exhausted and injured, she closed her eyes, listening to the small hisses and creaks of her suit, each one a tiny cog in a machine that was built to keep her alive, the only sounds in a sea of peaceful nothing. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to fear. Just, nothing.

Kez opened her eyes, finding herself in the matter courier room on *Lucas*. Eureka hugged her, Iscah hugged her. The urn was there. They had done it. They'd saved the day. Theo was there too. He hugged her. Everything was going to be alright. Everything was going to be—

Kez awoke with a start, bonking her forehead against the glass front of her spacesuit. *Shit.*

She glanced around wildly, eventually spotting the black hole, now nothing more than a speck of slowly consumed light in the distance, next to a ruddy great, heavily damaged planet.

Well, I'm out of comms range now.

Kez needed a plan, and fast. Two options, return or be rescued. Return was out. Her thrusters were dead on account of all of the fuel for them now coating her spacesuit. She had to be rescued. She needed to be seen.

Fuel coating her spacesuit.

Needed to be seen.

OK, Kez breathed to herself, running her good arm over her suit, feeling for the battery that sat up by her heart. Once found, her hand trailed down, following the thick cable to the point where it entered the suit. If she ripped it out, it would spark, igniting the fuel and making a hell of a scene. The spacesuit *should* be able to survive the explosion, and *should* was as good as she was going to get.

Kez pulled, hard. Nothing moved. The cabling stayed firmly in place.

She tugged again, and again, each pull tightening muscles around her broken ribs until, eventually, she felt the wire come loose.

One more.

Kez tore the live cable from its socket, severing power from her suit. Immediately she drove the cable into the thick goo all over her suit, bracing for the explosion.

Nothing happened.

The fuel didn't conduct electricity, and wires don't spark in a vacuum. An oxidiser would help, and Kez quickly remembered that the thruster pack had its own supply. A pack that, at this moment, was floating beside her, two arm lengths away.

An alarm inside the suit bleeped, indicating that her air recycling system was no longer functional. For an inexplicable reason, it had just lost power.

Air.

Kez glanced around, looking for her latest idea. She found it quickly, a serrated metal slice of the thruster pack, floating nearby. She collected it slowly, being sure to not knock it away from herself forever, and weighed up how to go about the next step. She only needed a small amount of oxygen to begin the thruster fuel cascade, and the easiest way to obtain some was to let it out of her suit. The weakest point, as everyone who had ever taken a spacewalk will tell you, is between the sections of thick padding that make up the palm and fingers. A quick cut between them would allow her to drench the fuel, allowing combustion to begin.

However, which hand should she cut? Cutting the left would mean she'd have to use her broken arm to do so, and then perform any and all subsequent actions with it. Cutting the right would mean that she would be fighting the pressure changes with it. Neither would be fun.

With a final deep breath, Kez moved the shard of metal into her right hand, and cut open the suit on her left.

Immediately, the release of air pressure caused her to spin. She pressed her hand quickly against her suit, limiting the flow of oxygen while simultaneously placing it where it needed to be. Kez then blindly fumbled for the wire with her right hand, gritting her teeth tightly as each movement dug a shard of bone into the surrounding muscle. She couldn't find it. She went back to the battery pack, the alarms in her suit screaming as she did, and searched for the wire. It was there, but the release of air was blowing it around erratically, making it impossible to hold onto it with a broken arm in a thick spacesuit. Out

of ideas, out of time, and clearly out of self-preservation, Kez drew back her right fist, the shard of metal jutting out from it, and drove it as hard as she could into the battery by her heart.

The battery exploded, igniting the oxygen and the fuel, blowing Kez backwards with a huge concussive blast. If anyone was looking for her, there's no way they would have missed that.

With thirty seconds of oxygen left, Kez realised that she wasn't panicked. She was calm. She knew she was going to be saved. She knew that someone would be there to catch her. She had a team she trusted. Everything was going to be alright.

Incredibly, Kez was right. An enormous entity descended into her vision, bearing down on her position at speed.

It was the *Omphalos*.

Fatoumata, Kez breathed in relief, watching as the Homeship stopped in front of her. *I'll take it.*

Kez relaxed, waiting to be teleported to safety. She pondered briefly if she was in fact unkillable. If her destiny to die in the past was assured, then her death before then would be a paradox. Maybe this entire time it hadn't been blind luck keeping her alive, but simple inevitability?

Well, if that was the case, a dark thought wondered, why hadn't she been teleported to safety yet?

The *Omphalos* floated in front of Kez, rigid and unmoving, almost as if it was simply waiting for her to die.

Oh yeah, Kez said, sighing her last breath away at the realisation. *Baxter killed Fatoumata.*

STELLAR ORBIT | 2783

'Door please,' barked Baxter, his mouth wrapped around the handle of a tea trolley he was pushing. The guard obliged, shoving open one of the massive doors beside them. Inside, sitting by the giant, angled window that made up one side of their office, Fatoumata was reclining in their favourite chair, feet on a plush stool, hands steepled in thought. 'Thought you could do with a cuppa,' he announced, rolling the trolley over to them.

'Hm?' Fatoumata mumbled, their attention elsewhere. 'Oh, thank you. Enough for two I hope?'

'Always,' Baxter barked, removing the lid of the cloche and allowing

the scent of sweet steeping leaves to float around the room.

'No teapot?' Fatoumata asked, taking their favourite cup into their hands, enjoying the warmth. 'You're slipping, Baxter.'

Baxter barked playfully, biting the edge of his tea cup and hopping up onto the footstool as Fatoumata slid it over to him. He gazed out of the angled window, through the defensive shield of the Homeship, and out onto the deep orange star beyond. The two sat in silence, watching the loops of a coronal mass ejection slowly spill out into space.

'Something on your mind?' Baxter barked. 'I'm aware our trail has gone cold, but I'm sure we'll find the culprit behind the Betelgeuse supernova soon enough.'

'It's not that,' said Fatoumata, eyes lost in the middle distance. 'I just spoke with Kezia. Poor girl. I sent her everything we had on Harker.'

'A wise decision,' Baxter barked. 'By all accounts, she earned it.'

Fatoumata sighed, gazing over at the reports that lit up the screen on their desk. So much loss.

'I can't believe Osheen is gone,' they said sadly, bringing the cup to their lips before sighing and returning it to their lap. 'Life gives us such wondrous gifts, it can be heart-breaking to lose them.'

Discreetly, Fatoumata opened a hand, palm up, allowing a nanobot to hop out of their tea onto it. With a silent scurry, the nanobot uploaded its finding to the desk screen. Toxins. Lots of them.

'There goes another,' they said sadly, before raising their voice for the order. 'You were right.'

A blue light briefly filled the room as a shot from an energy weapon hit Baxter in the side. He yelped, staggering around briefly, then fell unconscious, spilling his tea onto the rug below.

'Sorry, old friend,' Fatoumata said softly, stroking his staticky fur as his leg twitched.

'I can't believe I shot a dog,' the guard said, removing her helmet and allowing red hair to cascade over her shoulders.

'This one is certainly going to take some explaining to St. Peter,' nodded Fatoumata, and the two of them began to operate on the body.

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Kez took a breath, filling her lungs with the welcoming flood of stale, reconstituted air. She coughed, causing less pain than expected to spread out from her ribs. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes and found

that she was in a perfectly white room.

'Am I dead?' she asked.

'No,' said a kind voice from nearby. Kez twisted her neck slowly, revealing a smiling Fatoumata kneeling beside her, tidying up a small fleet of nanobots. 'You are as alive as I am.'

'No offence,' said Kez, 'but that's less comforting than you think it is.'

As her eyes adjusted to the bright lights above her, Kez began to realise that the room she was in wasn't entirely white. It was a bridge, and a damn impressive one at that. Giant consoles curved out of the floor, flashing a delightful array of smooth buttons, like pixelated Christmas lights. Bubbling tubes of coolant dropped from ceiling to floor, and the wall everything was pointed at featured a heavily labelled display of Ipricus. A handful of crew made up of various species bustled about, with a very familiar Yap in the centre of it all.

'Baxter!' Kez pointed, groaning as she sat up. 'He's—'

'We know, ya daftie,' a woman with fire for hair said as she wandered over. 'He's been fixed, don't worry.'

It took Kez a second to process that idea.

'Why would neutering him—'

'His *NPC* has been fixed,' the woman tutted, her face sharpening as it came into focus. 'Removed actually, just like the rest of our skeleton crew.'

'Lily?' Kez groaned as her face finally swam into view. 'You look older.'

'Oh, ta very much,' Lily grumbled, folding her arms. 'I know it took a while to pick you up but I was assuming you'd be a tad more grateful.'

'I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time to explain,' Fatoumata said, pulling Kez to her feet. 'For now, all you need to know is that Lily here delivered a warning to us about Osheen a week ago.'

'You arrived a week early?' Kez asked, tentatively moving her broken arm. She could feel the temporary splint holding her bones together, but it was better than nothing.

'Six *years* early,' said Lily. 'As per Eureka's plan, I waited until the last moment to inform Fatoumata, thus minimising paradoxes or chances of being caught.'

'And maximising how tricky it is to do anything about it,' said Fatoumata, returning to their chair in the centre of the massive bridge. 'Kez, what's the status onboard *Lucas*?'

‘We – Eureka, Iscah, and I – had a plan to recover the urn. If my spacewalk failed, and it did, Iscah was going to rush it.’

‘So, the urn should be in Eureka and Iscah’s possession?’

‘Yeah,’ shrugged Kez. ‘Probably …’

Iscah held her breath, listening for footsteps, clutching the urn tightly to her chest. When she was sure it was clear, she took another step to her right, dangling cables brushing through her hair. Then she stopped, steadied her breathing, and listened for footsteps again.

By her calculation, she was now on the third floor, approaching the matter couriers. She’d entered the vent on the fifth floor, scaled up two, and was now in the space behind the wall on the third, heading right. She had about twenty steps to go before she could escape.

Iscah heard the noise again. Metal arms extending, settling, retracting. Sometimes they contacted with the carpeted floor, thudding softly. Other times, they clamped onto the metal wall panels, echoing loudly and suddenly. After a time, they passed by, allowing Iscah space to breathe again. Morag was smart. She knew there was only one way off this ship and she wasn’t going to let Iscah take it. However, her patrol of the third floor gave Iscah a tiny chance. If she sneaked out of her hiding place at the right moment, she’d have just enough time to teleport away to the *Omphalos*, Ipricus, or just deep space. The urn had to leave the station.

A loud crashing from further down the corridor caused Iscah to jump. Suddenly, a panel was ripped away, no more than ten metres back. Then, another. Iscah moved quickly, timing each step with the noise to stay hidden. Morag was moving fast, tearing away panel after panel. By now she was five metres away. Three. One.

‘Osheen,’ crackled a familiar voice over the station’s speakers. ‘I’d like to talk.’

Iscah froze, trying to convince her heart to stop beating as the panel beside her was slowly pulled away. She was aware that she and Morag were sharing the same thought.

Was that Fatoumata?

‘Morag,’ crackled a different, panicked voice. ‘The bridge, now.’

Without a second of hesitation, the panel dropped to the ground, and Iscah heard the familiar sound of Morag’s arms rapidly faded away down the corridor. Not wanting to waste a second, Iscah hopped out of

the wall via the last panel Morag had removed and sprinted towards the matter courier. If Fatoumata was alive, she had a much safer jump ahead of herself.

'Hello, Iscah.'

Iscah barely had time to acknowledge Malcolm's presence before he shot towards her, aiming himself up her nose, coiling underneath her brain, and releasing a small static shock, enough to snatch her consciousness away for a few minutes.

Osheen's hands shook as he gazed at the alert for Fatoumata's impossible hail. Internally, he ran a command for Baxter to kill himself, but received an error in return. He grunted, answering the hail.

'You're late, Fatoumata,' he muttered as their face appeared on the viewscreen.

'You wish,' they replied bitterly.

The two glared at each other for a moment, both drowning in a rising tide of betrayal. Osheen scanned the room behind them, spotting Kez and Lily.

'Did you kill Baxter?' Osheen asked. 'I tried to reach him, but he seems to be offline.'

'Surrender,' Fatoumata said, disregarding anything Osheen had to say today. 'This is your only warning.'

'Or … ?' Osheen asked.

'Or I will blow you out of the damn sky,' spat Fatoumata. 'Five seconds to comply.'

'Guess I'll die then,' Osheen shrugged, flopping backwards into his chair and snapping at someone offscreen. 'If you don't mind, I've got someone who'd like to say goodbye first.'

Alphonse entered the frame, dumping Eureka at Osheen's feet. She was bound, but alive.

'Look what we found.'

'Eureka!' Lily said, earning a stern look from Fatoumata in the process.

'Tell you what,' Osheen grinned, sitting forwards, a boot on Eureka's neck. 'I'll trade. Eureka for Kez. No questions asked.'

'No,' said Fatoumata sternly.

'Oh, come on, Fatou,' Osheen said. 'Mine's a legendary rare. What's

yours, a basic common?'

Behind Osheen the doors opened. Malcolm entered, Iscah floating behind him.

'Look at that,' he smiled. 'Now it's a two for one. A bargain!'

'Your time is up,' Fatoumata said, unfazed.

'Then fire, *old friend,*' Osheen spat, ending the communication. He sat back, tapping nervously on his chair, hoping that he'd sown enough discord for a good old-fashioned mutiny.

'Damn him,' Fatoumata mumbled to themself, turning to face the latest addition to their crew.

'We can't fire on Iscah and Eureka,' exclaimed Kez. 'Not to mention that Bea and E-NA are still inside *Lucas*'s systems.'

'We should try to take out the transporter inhibitor,' Baxter barked. 'Rescue the hostages first.'

'That's here,' Kez said, pointing at the floating diagram of *Lucas*. 'Buried in among almost every life support system. You'd need a scalpel to take it out.'

Baxter and Kez stared at the diagram intensely, eyes running across system after system. 'There!' they both exclaimed at the same time, pointing a paw and a finger, respectively.

'Computer security?' Fatoumata asked.

'E-NA and Bea,' said Kez. 'It'll give them full access to the station.'

'Including the ability to remove the transport inhibitor,' barked Baxter.

'So, one shot, one system hit, then we can pull the four of them out?' Fatoumata asked.

'As long as we're quick,' said Baxter. 'A security backup will activate after a short while, locking them back out.'

'How long?'

'Seconds,' he whimpered. 'If that.'

Fatoumata nodded, taking in the information before turning to the person they needed to hear from the most.

'Lily?'

Lily didn't reply. She stood, arms folded, facing away from the conversation, a look of thunder upon her face. After six years of waiting, Eureka was right there. The girl in the space station next door. Lily longed to lean out of the window and see her, sitting in that

bubble of hers, gazing out at the stars. Based on the situation, there was only one way she'd ever be with her wife again. The hard way.

'Take the shot,' she said softly. 'Eureka can handle it.'

'It's time then,' Fatoumata said, taking their close friend's paw into their own hand. 'Baxter, it has been an honour.'

'The honour was all mine,' barked Baxter.

Fatoumata stood, opened up intergalactic comms, and made history.

'I, Fatoumata Aria, hereby relinquish the title of The Beatific Excellence, and any and all command privileges assigned to the role. I understand that any actions I partake in beyond this moment are that of my own volition, and not of the Affinity.'

As they finished speaking, a ripple of code ran across the entire galaxy. Power began to shift, news broke, and the full suite of devastating weaponry that the *Omphalos* offered unlocked. Fatoumata closed the comms.

'Anyone on board who wishes to leave should do so now. I shall be taking illegal command of the *Omphalos*.'

Nobody on the bridge moved. Lifeforms from every corner of the galaxy stood stock still, cemented into place by respect.

'Orders?' Baxter asked after a moment.

Fatoumata looked at Osheen's time machine on the viewfinder, aware that for the very first time in seven hundred years, nobody knew how this was going to end.

'Fire,' they said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Ipricus War

Silently, the first missile struck *Lucas*. With the brutal force of a tiny, classified engine, it wedged itself into the impeccably designed shielding of the station, reported back to the *Omphalos* exactly how the shield was impeccably designed, and dissolved. The second missile, half a moment later, pierced the shield, exploding with a colossal force that sent the crew and hostages onboard *Lucas* crashing to the ground.

'FUCK!' yelled Osheen as he climbed back to his feet, retrieved his urn from the floor, and scrambled to the closest window. Outside, he watched the shield around his station fizzle out as shards of white-hot metal floated away, like leaves down a brook.

'They have hit the computer security banks,' Malcolm reported.

'Why would they—?' Osheen began, before turning just in time to see Iscah vanish into nothingness. 'Lock it down, NOW!' he snarled, marching over to Eureka, gripping her wrist, daring her to leave.

'Completed,' said Malcolm. 'Backup security is in place.'

Osheen gritted his teeth, occasional sparks cascading over him.

'There goes the easy way,' he grumbled to himself, stepping over Eureka and throwing himself into his chair. 'Bea, activate the hard way protocol.'

Another rumble shook the station. Something vital fell away into the black hole.

'I'll do it then, shall I?' said Morag quietly.

Iscah had barely hit the floor before Kez had her in her arms, ignoring the pain in her ribs that the hug was causing.

'Hi, Kez,' Iscah croaked.

No hug for me? E-NA asked internally. *Favouritism.*

I'll hug you, replied Bea.

Pass, replied E-NA. *I know where you've been.*

'They're back,' Kez announced, pointing at her own head.

'Security has been partially restored on the station,' barked Baxter. 'We can teleport in, but nobody out.'

‘Eureka is still over there,’ said Lily sadly. ‘The universe must be jealous of us.’

Baxter, eyes on a very angry-looking screen, stopped wagging his tail.

‘Fatoumata,’ he whimpered. ‘Something is coming out of the planet!’

Several years ago, a man that no longer exists decided to destroy the planet Ipricus. His reasoning, if you could call it that, was that just above the Gutenberg discontinuity, in the really gooey centre of the planet, something was historically and scientifically wrong.

The planet stopped. Right where there should have been liquid metals, there wasn’t anything. With some seriously heavy drilling equipment, the man made a vertical bee-line towards the core, stopping only when he ran out of elements to dig through. Sure enough, Ipricus didn’t have a centre. It had a wormhole for a heart, artificially suspended in place in a web of metal. Old metal. Metal that had stood there for hundreds of years. Everything he’d known, everything he’d ever taught and been taught, was wrong. The Affinity couldn’t have been the first to spread across the stars. For most, this would be the archaeological find of a lifetime. For Jack Braddock, this was a nightmare. Contradictory evidence against every artefact he’d forged. Every piece of evidence he’d fabricated. Ipricus would show the galaxy that he wasn’t one of the finest historians ever to live. He was, in fact, a fraud. It had to go.

With a weapon, poorly liberated from an Affinity warship, he destroyed the superstructure supporting the wormhole, accidentally causing the planet to fall in on itself. He was tried, found guilty, and wiped from the face of time by accident, restoring Ipricus, and its suspended wormhole, to its full glory. Had Jack entered the wormhole, he would have discovered that on the other side, in a dark corner of the galaxy, an entire fleet of half-mile wide starships was under never-ending construction, with swarms of self-replicating robots ripping apart entire solar systems for parts. On closer inspection, he would have seen that these ships were a modified Affinity design, built for war, and that it wasn’t aliens that built the wormhole at the heart of Ipricus, it was a time traveller who thought correctly that one day he might need an army.

‘Incredible,’ Osheen remarked, as his fleet went to war. Seventeen ships emerged before the *Omphalos* reacted, turning its attention away from Osheen and over to the oncoming armada. There was a brief pause, presumably to try to make contact, before the *Omphalos* unleashed all manner of hell.

Hyperplane torpedoes were fired, for the first time in history, to devastating effect. A weakness of weaponised vehicles is that you can only really fire out of the exposed parts of the craft, creating points of fragility. The *Omphalos* had no such weakness. Deep in its core, tens of thousands of torpedo tubes sat, each one fully enclosed. When a torpedo was fired, the missile would scream down the tube before being teleported out, mid-flight, as close as possible to its target. No warning, no fucking about, just death delivered hot and fresh to your front door. Osheen’s first ship fell within moments, followed by the second, and the third, each one enveloped by a sphere of firepower. Soon, all seventeen were destroyed. By that time however, twenty-two had taken their place, pressing out rapidly and gradually towards the *Omphalos*.

If Osheen had calculated this correctly, the *Omphalos* had about ten minutes before it was overwhelmed.

‘Divert power to the torpedo constructors,’ Fatoumata yelled, watching the silent battle rage on overhead. ‘We need to push them back.’

‘Impossible,’ barked Baxter. ‘We’d have to kill off too many critical systems.’

‘I need ideas then,’ Fatoumata said to the room at large. ‘What have we got, people?’

‘I know you just quit, but any chance of support from the Affinity?’ Lily asked.

‘None,’ Fatoumata replied. ‘With Osheen still in control of the NPCs, they’d not be on our side.’

‘They’re pouring from the inside of the planet,’ Baxter barked. ‘Let’s find out how and cut them off at the pass.’

‘Excellent,’ Fatoumata nodded. ‘Iscah, are you up for that?’

‘Me?!’ Iscah exclaimed, still processing the rapid briefing she’d just been through. ‘I’m not sure I—’

‘To remain undetected, we need to send as few people as possible,’ Fatoumata said. ‘As we’re running a skeleton crew here, *you* have the

most on-the-ground training in hostile situations.'

'I'd argue that I do, but I lack the technical knowhow,' Lily said. 'The technology in this time is incredible. I tried to find out the time and accidentally made infinite fish.'

'Of course that was you,' Kez muttered, trying to suppress the olfactory memory.

'I'll go,' Iscah said, pressing down the fear just long enough to respond. 'I can do it.'

'Excellent,' said Fatoumata. 'Baxter, take her to get suited up. We'll clear launch zone three for you.'

Baxter nodded as the two of them ran out of sight. As they left, the bridge rocked as the immense shields of the *Omphalos* deflected another burst of ordinance. Fatoumata didn't move an inch.

'We'll need to distract Osheen to give Iscah a chance of getting through that,' Kez said, pointing at the twenty-five ships that they were locked in combat with.

'Oh, we have a distraction alright,' Fatoumata said, sharing a grin with Lily and nodding to a nearby Tectato. 'Let's send it over.'

'What is it?' Kez asked.

'A gift,' they grinned. 'One from an old friend.'

Iscah zipped up the front of her protection suit. Nanobots melted it sealed as she went.

'Sensors picked up electrical surges in these three areas,' Baxter barked, pressing a paw against several points of a diagram of Ipricus on a monitor. 'I don't know what they are, but they're important.'

'Got it,' said Iscah, the neckline of her helmet sealing shut with a hiss as she scrambled into the cockpit of a small, razor sharp looking vessel, catching the device that Baxter threw her way as she sat down.

'Tracker,' he explained. 'Big one. Should allow us to send some hyperplane torpedoes down there if you need them.'

Iscah nodded and closed the tight cockpit around her.

Alright, she thought to herself, as a path through the hail of fire was programmed by the computer. *Let's go blow up a planet.*

With a roar of engines and barely any disturbed air, the fighter took flight, teleporting through the outer hull of the *Omphalos* and heading towards the heart of Ipricus.

‘Put her in there,’ Osheen said, heaving up the access door that led to a thin service hatch. ‘I’ll follow in a moment.’

Morag dropped Eureka carelessly onto the ground, eyes still locked onto Osheen.

‘In you get,’ Morag said, an arm wrenching the cover open, another removing Eureka’s bindings.

‘Hard pass,’ Eureka muttered, eyeing the tiny, dark passageway.

‘We’re going to the time machine,’ said Osheen, placing his urn down next to him. ‘Your choice is either through one of these maintenance tubes, or through glass corridors that I’m pretty sure no longer contain air.’

‘Make me,’ spat Eureka.

‘Fair enough,’ said Osheen.

With a swift movement, one of Morag’s arms coiled around Eureka’s. Half pressed one way, and half the other. Eureka felt her bones creak.

‘All I need is for my hostage to be alive,’ sneered Osheen. ‘Unbroken limbs are only a plus for you.’

Osheen raised a hand to give the order, but froze, a peculiar sound emanating from the hallway outside the bridge, muffled by the door. It sounded like a horror from beyond human comprehension, screaming.

‘Hey,’ smiled Eureka. ‘My old ringtone.’

Osheen shot Eureka a judgemental look before heading over to the door to investigate. Slowly he approached, taking care not to trip over any of the blown panels or snaking wires that lay scattered about the floor of his bridge. As he reached the door, he unlocked it, slid it open, and was instantly decapitated.

‘The *fuck* is that?!’ Alphonse yelled, as a colossal creature scratched its way into the room, buckling the door frame as it squeezed in, desperate to slaughter anything in its way.

‘The Beast of Farheart,’ Morag replied, remembering it from its tussle with Theo. ‘Stay back.’

Alphonse roared, matching all twelve feet of its height, but seriously coming up short when it came to matching the number of legs of his opponent. He grabbed the Beast by the mandibles, before a shake of its head sent him sailing through a wall.

Morag stepped up, deft swipes of her arms breaking any bone that she could hit. With a flash of jaws, all of her arms hit the floor, no longer attached to her vat. Malcolm, witnessing the carnage, bailed.

‘RUN!’ Osheen yelled, already back in one piece. He slid under the Beast’s body as it turned and scrambled into the maintenance tunnel

that led to the time machine. As he ducked out of sight, Alphonse exploded out of the wall, delivering blow after blow into the creature's skull before a headbutt in return sent him crashing through the floor, into the medical bay below. The Beast followed, driving Alphonse down through another floor, and giving Osheen time to check on Morag. Time he didn't take.

'Malcolm,' he commanded. 'To me!'

Malcolm appeared, the closest sense he had to eyesight locked onto Osheen, and entered the tunnel alongside him. Osheen slammed the cover closed, but not before noticing Eureka bolting out of the bridge via its solitary door.

'Let's go,' he spat, crawling away from his bridge as a monster tore it into shreds.

Iscah leapt from the wreckage of her fighter, more than a little relieved that the crash hadn't torn her suit in any way, but less than chuffed that the tracker was in pieces. 'Should have expected the gravity flip,' she muttered to herself, trying to jam the tracker back together before giving up and taking in her surroundings. She was standing on a rocky, yet smoothly cut floor on the hollow underside of the planet. Above her, where the core of Ipricus should have been, the interior of the planet arched away monstrously in every direction. In the centre of this mighty cavern, the wormhole sat, belching out a colossal warship every few seconds. She watched as the latest one slipped into this part of the universe, weapons primed and ready, and shot off down one of several exits that had been bored by the original salvo of ships.

Around this wormhole, holding it open, sat a framework of metal. A visual overlay in Iscah's helmet suggested that it connected to the planet in three places, and that one of them was nearby. 'Target acquired,' she said, hoping that somehow someone could hear her. 'I'm going in.'

Eureka descended the flight of stairs as far as her borderline arthritic legs could carry her, trying to remember the layout of a ship that she hadn't lived on for decades.

'Bridge, medical, matter courier, kitchen, recreation, engineering,' she repeated to herself, trying to keep the layout in her head. One

more flight down and she'd be at the matter courier. If she could—

A roar indicated the approach of the Beast. It scampered past the staircase of the third floor, a limp Alphonse dangling from its mouth. It caught sight of Eureka, spat out its meal, then lunged for the far tastier-looking one. Eureka bolted back up the stairs, returning to the floor above. The medical bay was a no go, she'd seen it be written off mere moments ago, but that wasn't the only room on this floor. With a sharp turn she entered her old dorm room and, with no better idea, rolled underneath her bunk.

It didn't take long for the Beast to find the room. With a crashing swing of its tail, the doors burst inwards, slamming to the ground and sliding to the far end of the room. A nose entered, followed by eyes and enough teeth to make a shark feel inadequate. The Beast sniffed for its prey, strings of saliva splattering to the floor beside Eureka. She gripped onto the wooden slats above her and slid over as far as she could, desperate to not be found.

It didn't work. The bed exploded off Eureka, crashing into the ceiling and shattering into pieces, raining chunks of wood down upon her. The Beast caught sight of her and licked its lips with both of its tongues. Then, it stopped, its attention drawn to something else in the room. It pushed forward through the door frame, mangling it beyond recognition as it slowly pulled itself towards the destroyed bed. It lowered its head slowly, carefully smelling the debris. After a moment, it looked back to Eureka, roared, and left the room, skittering away into the depths of *Lucas*.

Eureka, her heart going far too fast for her age, slowly used the corner of the room to get back to her feet. She stayed leaning against it for some time, wondering what on the moon just happened.

Deep in the service tunnels of *Lucas*, mid-way between the living quarters and the time machine, Osheen died, collapsing onto his own urn as he perished. The Beast's assault on the bridge had wiped out the last breathable air in this section, and Osheen could only hold his breath for so long. First, he had started to get dizzy. Then a sharp headache formed between his eyes, causing him to feel nauseous. He felt his brain tissue begin to waste away, and after an agonising second, succumbed to the pain. Then, he woke up again, his lungs full of what had once been his final breath. With a grim determination, he

dragged himself forwards through the small corridor, feeling the cycle start again.

'Anything the matter?' Malcolm asked, floating on behind him. Osheen didn't reply. He only had seconds before he died again, and a long way to go.

Iscah climbed up a server bank, slowly scanning each section of the computer that controlled the wormhole for a weakness. Something that would break, cascade, or just simply explode. She found nothing.

With a grunt she heaved herself up higher, ready to scan a new bank when the component she had just placed her foot on snapped, sending her crashing down several metres to the ground below. Warnings lit up her vision immediately. Oxygen leak. The glove of her suit had caught on the way down, ripping a hole through it and causing her small, golden sphere to fall from its mounting in her palm and soundlessly bounce away onto the ground. Iscah squeezed the hole shut as best she could, allowing the nanobots to commence their sealing work. 'Here to laugh at me?' Iscah asked the sphere as she waited for the sealing to finish.

The sphere didn't respond. Iscah glanced up as another ship tore into existence, its weapons primed and ready to aim at her friends. Friends that she lost contact with the moment the tracker was destroyed. It was up to her now, and she was failing.

'You know, these past few days would rip the faith from under most people, but not me. Do you know why? It's because I've been out there. I've seen what you created. This universe, it's incredible. Oceans of elements so cold that they boil. The very first days of a newly born star, and the very last days as they crumble in on themselves. I've seen fury and power that my brain can't even comprehend and all the time, every single step of it, I've praised you for this work of art that we call the universe. It is truly magnificent.'

The sphere didn't respond. Iscah's oxygen levels dipped under 30 per cent. 'I always thought that the greatest injustice was that you're not here. Not for our sake, but for yours. You built something so wondrous and vast, yet to you it's inaccessible. You'll never feel the warmth of a star, the hardness of a mineral. You'll never see the might of a weather system. That broke my heart.'

The sphere didn't respond. The nanobots were almost done.

‘I thought you needed us. I thought we were your eyes and ears in a place you could never reach. I thought our combined soul was yours and that everyone served a purpose. To connect creation to creator. In return, we get to experience it too. A transaction of kindness.’

The sphere didn’t respond. The nanobots finished patching, steadying Iscah’s air supply.

‘But now I know,’ said Iscah, picking up the sphere and glaring at it. ‘You don’t care about us. We’re tools to you. You don’t share this universe with us. You harvest it from us. So, from the bottom of my heart, from the deepest depths of a soul I know you don’t care about, I don’t need you anymore. I am Iscah, and I help people, unlike you.’

The sphere responded.

The *Omphalos* was now under a heavy bombardment as hundreds of missiles struck its surface every second. Fires tore through major systems, energy crackled from exposed wiring, and the injury count slowly ticked upwards.

‘This thing doesn’t have escape pods does it?’ Lily asked over the noise. ‘I’ve had luck with them in the past.’

Wordlessly, while concentrating on a thousand separate systems, Fatoumata launched three empty escape pods. They barely managed to survive a single second.

‘Fair enough,’ said Lily.

‘We should retreat,’ Kez yelled. ‘Without me, Osheen can’t complete his plan.’

‘We’ll have to cease fire to give the engines enough power to charge,’ Baxter barked. ‘Projections indicate that we’ll be dead before we can jump safely.’

‘Osheen wouldn’t kill Kez though,’ said Lily as another missile hit the ship. ‘Would he?’

‘He may not have planned for us rescuing her,’ said Fatoumata gravely. ‘Or, worse than that, he has.’

‘Fatoumata!’ Baxter barked. ‘This needs your immediate attention.’

‘This had better be good news,’ Fatoumata replied. ‘If it’s bad, I don’t want to hear it.’

‘You’ll really not want to hear this then,’ whined Baxter. ‘The time machine has just started up.’

Osheen stood, breathing in the wondrous air that had remained trapped in his time machine, gripping his urn tight to his chest as he watched *Lucas*'s rotors unfold.

'You know, I could rip it all down, start again,' he muttered darkly. 'I gave them every chance. All I wanted was to put the universe right, and now I have to start over. May as well start over without them.'

He glanced at Malcolm, watching helplessly and unblinkingly from the control room. 'Oh don't give me that look,' he chuckled to himself. 'You're right though, we have put a lot of work into it. Let's play one last card, see if they fold.'

Above him, the turbines began to spin. Beyond that, the battle raged on. They had minutes left.

'If they survive, contact Fatoumata,' he smiled. 'Tell them I'm ready to talk.'

Iscah's sphere had cracked open, seemingly of its own accord, and was displaying a hologram of the Milky Way around itself. Highlighted by a slowly flashing dot was her mission from God.

'I thought this was a myth,' she whispered to the sphere as the dot expanded to give her an overview of the non-Affinity planet in dire need of saving. Quickly, the sphere shifted its hologram to the planet, placing itself at the centre. Sections of it lit up, indicating key points and people to talk to. 'You know I'd help these people if I could,' she said desperately. 'Right now though, I've got some other stuff going on. If you want to help out with any of that then feel free to—'

Then, she froze. She looked at the current projection: the planet, its cities, oceans, and ice caps. Orbiting it was a space station, with several tiny ships moving around it. Iscah watched as one left the station, flew away for a moment, then activated a rudimentary warp drive and vanishing from the projection.

'This isn't an image,' Iscah whispered. 'It's a live feed.'

Iscah looked up, not towards the centre of the planet, but beyond that, to the unknowable. To her God, in thanks for the gift she had just received.

'OK,' she smiled, starting to become whole again. 'That's a good start.'

‘Only a few seconds until shield failure!’ Baxter barked as a wall panel exploded across the room, embedding itself in the main viewscreen. The artificial gravity failed briefly, throwing everyone up and letting them fall back to the hard floor again.

‘Divert power from weapons,’ Fatoumata ordered, gripping the arm of their chair tightly.

‘I already have,’ Baxter barked back.

‘Incoming message,’ Kez said, pointing at a flashing yellow light and staggering over to it. ‘It’s Iscah.’

‘I need a torpedo at my coordinates,’ Iscah said the moment Kez connected to her. ‘I’ll arm it, then you can bring me back. Big wormhole in the planet’s centre. This should close it.’

‘What are you broadcasting from?’ barked Baxter, looking at his readings. ‘The signal strength is exquisite.’

‘I’ve had a little help from a friend,’ said Iscah.

‘Baxter,’ said Fatoumata, aware that he was already on it. ‘Do we have any torpedoes left?’

‘No,’ Baxter replied, kicking himself for not reserving any. ‘However, I could send the self-destruct mechanism of the ship down in its place.’

‘Do it,’ nodded Fatoumata. ‘In a couple of seconds, we won’t need it anyway.’

‘I’m not sure I know how to arm that …’ Iscah murmured.

‘I can arm it from here,’ Baxter barked, activating the self-destruct countdown. His paws became a blur, overwriting nearly every safety mechanism in the book as he locked onto and teleported away the most volatile section of the ship.

‘It’s away!’ he barked.

Iscah jumped as an almighty frustum of metal crashed down next to her, spreading cracks away from it as far as the eye could see. The brass-coloured piping that covered the majority of its surface began to glow as it pulsed, emanating waves of energy that took Iscah off her feet.

‘Anytime now!’ she yelled into her comms device as the pulses increased in speed and ferocity, threating not just to rip her suit apart, but to tear all the flesh from her skeleton.

A missile crashed into the *Omphalos*, lurching the ship sideways and sending the majority of its crew into the opposite wall.

'All good here?' Iscah said, clearly relieved as she appeared, the only person currently standing on the entire bridge.

'No,' Baxter barked, hopping back up to his console. 'Shields are down. One more hit and—'

Suddenly, what was left of the viewfinder became overwhelmed with light. As it faded, the crew watched in awe as Ipricus began to fall into itself. Entire continents ripped themselves apart and fell into the void left by the collapsing core. Eventually, something gave, and Ipricus burst outwards, then was rapidly pulled inwards again, the majority of its mass dissolving away as the wormhole scoffed whatever it could before it too fell apart.

'You did it,' Fatoumata whispered, clasping Iscah on the shoulder.

'The enemy ships have faltered,' barked Baxter. 'Whatever was controlling them was either inside the planet, or on the other side of the wormhole.'

'We've won?' Kez said, beaming around the burning bridge. 'We've finally won?'

'Not until Eureka is here,' said Lily.

'Lily is right,' Fatoumata said, returning to their chair. 'The battle is over, but as long as Osheen still stands, the war endures.'

'How dramatic, Fatou,' crackled Osheen's voice. 'Why don't we just talk?'

Fatoumata glanced at Baxter, who raised his paws in confusion. He'd not connected them.

'We've put a stop to your fleet,' Fatoumata said, rising from their chair. 'Additionally, I assume that a single blast from us would obliterate your time machine. It's time, Osheen. Surrender.'

Osheen's cackle echoed through the room.

'You're quite right,' he chuckled. 'One blast here and … boom.'

'Then do what's right,' Fatoumata pleaded. 'End this.'

The room fell as silent as any heavily bombarded room possibly could. On the other end of the line, Osheen breathed heavily.

'Tell me, can you still access Affinity news channels?' Osheen asked.

Fatoumata didn't respond.

'Excellent,' Osheen said, playing his final card.

Far, far away, orbiting the barycentre of the uninhabited Groombridge 34 system, an Affinity science vessel exploded, killing everyone on board. Their final report, broadcast on emergency channels, revealed a monstrous finding buried deep in the heart of one of the twin red dwarf stars in the system. The Plofbare stellar experiment that crashed here, identical to the ones that were embedded in many stars across the galaxy, activated, triggering a forced, physics-defying supernova.

Groombridge 34 B exploded violently, obliterating its stellar twin and the science vessel remains in a matter of seconds. Minutes later the Affinity news networks filled with the story, sending a wave of terror through the heart of the entire galaxy. Planets where the Plofbare had performed these experiments began to evacuate, with trillions of lifeforms abandoning their homes for the safety of deep space. Far away, watching the chaos unfold, Osheen grinned.

'This takes me back,' he chuckled to himself.

The crew of the *Omphalos* watched the footage, aghast.

'Pretty self-explanatory,' Osheen said over the speakers. 'The Plofbare solar experiments are my design. Eighteen more stellar warheads, scattered about the galaxy, ready to rip through *billions* of lives. You destroy me, I destroy them. Simple as that.'

'Betelgeuse was you,' Fatoumata whispered. 'Thousands died! Millions more have been made homeless!'

'An experiment,' Osheen replied calmly. 'I needed to know that they worked. I needed you to know the fear you know now.'

Fatoumata shook their head, dust and debris cascading onto the floor. 'Why?' they asked.

'You know why,' Osheen said. 'Send Kez.'

With that, he cut contact. Fatoumata punched the arm of their chair.

'What do we do?' Baxter asked.

The question lingered in the air, giving everyone time to process it. There were two options. Osheen seizes control of the galaxy, or it burns.

Kez watched the time machine on the cracked display of the bridge, its turbines ferociously spinning, ready to send her to her death. The last loop that needed closing. The end of all of this. She straightened herself up, took a single, smoky breath, and sealed her fate.

'I'll go,' she said.

Osheen watched for a final time as the focal point of his time machine warped and fell away into nothing, the light in the machine ignoring its very existence. Now all that was needed was a passenger.

'Come on,' he muttered to himself, repeating it over and over. As if in answer, Kez appeared in the machine. Battered, broken, and torn to shreds. She looked defeated.

Good.

Osheen placed his urn to one side, reached into his pocket, and withdrew a pen. With a swift motion he hurled it at Kez, then watched as it bounced off her.

'Not a hologram?' he laughed. 'I overestimated you.'

Kez bent down, picked up the pen, and handed it back to him.

'No tricks,' she said calmly. 'You won. I just want this to be over.'

'Oh …' Osheen croaked in surprise. 'Thank you, Kez.'

'The way I see it, there are three options here,' Kez shrugged. 'One, I don't go back, you kill billions. I'm not having that. Two, I don't go back, you mess with time, who knows what happens. Three, I go back, nobody else has to die, except me. I pick three.'

'Reasonable,' nodded Osheen. Kez noticed that the corner of his eyes were starting to redden.

'Then at some point in the future, don't know when, don't know how, someone else will find out what you're doing,' said Kez. 'Someone else will stop you. Three gives the galaxy a shot.'

Osheen gave a short, hoarse chuckle, shaking his head.

'You know, Kez,' he said. 'I've never met someone so fucking contumacious in my entire life.'

'Long life,' nodded Kez.

'Oh, it has been,' said Osheen. 'You know when you were a kid and the summers seemed to last forever? That's because they did. Six weeks when you're ten is such a huge amount of your perceived time. When you're twenty, it's half that. Forty, half again. I'm 787 years old. If I'm not paying attention, years go by without me realising.'

With a sigh, Osheen allowed that age to come forward. The spent time. The weight of choices. The loss. 'The further I wandered into this endeavour, the less I had time to question it,' he said quietly. 'Although, once, I nearly gave all of this up. About a hundred years ago, in a garden. Nature pulled me from my script. I wondered what it would be like to abandon this idea. To just get on with life.'

Osheen closed his eyes; he was in that garden again. 'Then, a

thought occurred. Natalie would love this.'

'Your wife?' Kez asked.

Osheen nodded, the spell broken; he was back in the room.

'I used to miss her so much,' he said. 'I remember looking over at Natalie and feeling my heart break. Nobody was ever going to know her like I did. The way she danced to any music she heard, the gifts she used to buy me, all of which came with tales of disastrous shipping and errors, and the way she looked at Harker. I'm not just me, I'm her backup. That's the worst part of death. We take so much of the universe with us when we go.'

Osheen placed a hand over his mouth, as if he wanted to stop anything else coming out.

'You said you don't remember her face,' Kez said.

Osheen shook his head, tilting it to the ground.

'I don't,' he said softly. 'I don't remember the dances, or the gifts, or how she looked at my Harker. I just remember that those things were important to me. My memories have become nothing but captions without pictures, so I added my own. Emma. A false backstory that gave me space to grieve my real one.'

Osheen looked up at Kez, expecting a sympathetic look. Instead, he saw fire.

'You took my mum from me,' she said. '*My* Harker. *My* family. *My* life.'

'Look out there,' he replied, indicating the universe above. 'This existence of ours takes place in an ocean of darkness. If you can find a bright spot, I dare you not to do whatever it takes to hold onto it.'

Kez nodded. Osheen was right, which is why she reached out to her side, into the folding, whirling nothing, fingertips reaching for the focal point of the machine.

'What are you doing?' Osheen sputtered.

'Option four,' said Kez, feeling her fingers rip and fall and dance across time and space. 'If I don't exist, I never handed you that damned dataflake. You never became this. This last loop never closes. Paradoxes fold over paradoxes. Can your machine survive that?'

Osheen laughed a colossal, final laugh.

'I underestimated you,' he corrected.

'Don't worry,' Kez smiled back. 'I did too.'

'I think we all did,' Eureka said, appearing inside the room with a crackle and standing next to Kez.

'Oh yeah,' said Iscah, appearing the other side of Kez. 'Big time.'

‘I—’ Lily began, her cool entrance quip interrupted by a shrill scream.

‘LILY!’ yelled her wife, scooping her up in her arms. ‘You look younger!’

‘Being away from you will do that to a person,’ Lily smiled, before doing the thing she’d most missed doing for the past half decade.

‘Gracious,’ Fatoumata exclaimed, materialising inside the splash zone of some incredibly heavy petting.

‘Incredible, isn’t it,’ Iscah nodded. ‘I’m not sure how they’re even breathing right now.’

‘WHAT IS GOING ON!?’ Osheen yelled.

‘Oh, did we not say?’ a familiar voice said over the comm system. ‘We broke into your station, listened in on you and Kez having a chat, and decided to come lend a hand.’

‘Bea!?’ Osheen asked the air, the raspberry sounds that followed all but confirming her identity.

‘Don’t forget me,’ said E-NA. ‘Although, we’ve not met. I’m the ghost in Kez’s machine. We’re here to stop you.’

Eureka, Lily, Iscah, and Fatoumata stepped forward, putting themselves between Kez and Osheen.

‘So, this is the plan then?’ Osheen grinned. ‘Threats?! You’ve already seen what this machine will do. It’ll replace you as closely as it can. You’ll barely ripple the universe!’

‘That’s the plan,’ Kez said. ‘I’ll be gone, but you’ll be back here, having this exact same conversation, slowly remembering it all. No time to stop us. Just enough time to listen.’

‘I won’t listen,’ sneered Osheen. ‘I can promise you that.’

‘To me? I don’t expect you to,’ Kez said, refusing to let on how much pain her hand was in. ‘But maybe you’ll listen to the next me. Or the one after that. Or in a thousand Kezs time. A procession of people who tell you that you’re wrong. You’ll remember them all.’

‘Again, you’re missing the part where this is an actual plan,’ said Osheen. ‘You’ll touch the sphere, be replaced, and I’ll carry on.’

‘He’s not getting it,’ sighed Fatoumata.

‘Should we explain it to him?’ asked Eureka

‘Writing it down might help?’ nodded Lily.

‘I think I have some crayons,’ Iscah chuckled.

‘Osheen,’ Kez said, cutting through the jests of her friends. ‘When I touch this sphere, you’ll move to the new timeline, like you did with Jack. You’ll persist. Start again. Relive it all, then come back here and

reset again. You'll never make it past this point in time. Your story ends here, at the looping edge of infinite universes.'

Osheen, aware of the fate that now loomed over him, panicked. He tried to delve into Kez's mind, but was rejected. His attempts to activate the supernovas similarly fell on deaf ears. They had taken over, locked him into the dome of his own time machine. His brain scrambled for a plan. Any plan. Something to pull Kez away from that sphere.

After a moment, he had something.

'How about, I go back to the start,' Osheen said. 'Do it right this time, to hell with the paradoxes. Run the planet. Forge an empire. Make the Affinity a utopia. Stop people getting hurt. I could save Venus. Think of the lives!'

'Oh, because you've been so helpful before,' Eureka scoffed. 'Face it, you never gave humanity a chance. You clipped our wings before we could ever take flight.'

'We never *deserved* the chance!' raged Osheen. 'In my era, we had so much wealth, so much food, and yet people *starved*. It wasn't technology that fixed that, it wasn't removing scarcity, it was *me*. I changed the minds, I gave us all a chance. I built the damn world. I forged the technology. I brought peace. Without me, humans never would have got off that fucking rock. Why am I the villain to you?'

'Fruit juice,' said Kez.

'Fruit juice,' repeated Osheen, exasperated.

'Does anyone here like that Affinity culture is to drink fruit juice in the mornings? No food, just a thick liquid,' Kez asked. 'Anyone at all?'

Osheen raised a hand, the only one to do so.

'See?' said Kez. 'There's the problem. You told us that the smell of fried breakfasts makes you nauseous, so answer me truthfully. Did you take them away from all of us?'

Osheen gritted his teeth.

'I changed one thing.'

'Yeah,' said Kez. 'One thing. That's where it starts.'

Kez stretched her aching fingers out further, her body starting to enter the fold of space swirling around the focal point. Memories of a dark place returned to her as it reached towards her, called to her. This was her destination. Her end.

'Come with me then,' Osheen said, holding out a hand. 'Be at my side, keep me on the straight path. I can undo what I did to your mother, to Harker. You could have your family again, with no

interruption. No loss. What do you say?'

Kez shook her head slowly.

'She's not like you, Osheen,' Fatoumata said. 'She won't be defined by loss.'

'And look how much I'm going to lose,' Kez said, looking around at her friends, tears flowing freely. 'Fucking free will.'

'DON'T DO THIS, KEZIA!' screamed Osheen.

'See ya, gang,' Kez smiled. 'Keep an eye on the next one for me.'

'Of course,' Bea said over comms. 'For as long as it takes this bastard to listen.'

'Fuck 'em up, Kez,' Lily nodded.

'Keep the faith,' smiled Iscah.

'It's been an honour,' said Fatoumata. 'Truly.'

'If anyone askes, I'll say you died in a much less complicated way,' E-NA chuckled.

Kez turned to Eureka, tears meeting tears as they gazed at each other. At the person who made them better.

'Are you sure about this?' Eureka asked. 'It doesn't have to be you.'

'I know,' smiled Kez, ready. 'But if I don't do it, some other poor bastard will.'

With that, Kez touched the sphere, and this particular version of the universe was destroyed.

Chapter Thirty

'Til The End of Time

Infinity is awful. If you had infinity and a muffin to eat, you would never mathematically eat the muffin. The act of eating it would take literally no time in the span of infinity, and thus, no matter if you ate it or not, you'd never eat the muffin. So, when trapped in infinity, the choice is yours. Do you stare at a muffin forever, or stare at the space a muffin once was, the act of eating it never anything but a memory.

As Kez floated in absolute nothing, she pondered infinity in this way, before realising that she was probably just hungry. Hungry, forever.

'Are you God?' she eventually asked the things that floated in the dark space, somewhere between sixty seconds and sixty trillion years after arriving. 'Only, a friend of mine is a fan of yours.'

'No,' said the first thing.

'OK,' said Kez, nodding to herself. 'In a way, that's a relief.'

'Gods are believed to have created the universe,' said the second. 'That's above our jurisdiction.'

'What did I miss?' asked the third thing, which had arrived at the same time as Kez.

'Kez is just working out that we're old universes,' said the first universe.

'The universe … is alive?' Kez gasped – if she could have gasped, that is.

'No,' said the second universe. 'Life just appeared magically one day for no reason.'

'The universe is sarcastic?' muttered Kez.

'I am the first universe,' said the first universe. 'I began at the beginning, and ended when Austin Lang tampered with his own timeline.'

'I am the second,' said the second. 'I began at the beginning, and ended when Jack Braddock was erased from existence.

'I am the third,' said the third. 'I began at the beginning, and ended when you were erased from existence.'

'Wait, wait, wait,' said Kez, finally understanding. 'I'm currently in a graveyard for *abandoned universes*?'

'No,' corrected the second. 'You are currently in a graveyard for

abandoned *time*.'

'This is where deleted time is left,' said the third. 'Sort of like the recycle bin on your computer.'

'Recycle bin?' asked Kez, confused.

'That reference wasn't for you,' smiled the fourth universe.

'But I understood it,' said Hyacinth, causing Kez to absolutely shit herself, if she could in this place.

Hyacinth turned to Eureka, tears meeting tears as they gazed at each other. At the person who made them better.

'Are you sure about this?' Eureka asked. 'It doesn't have to be you.'

'I know,' smiled Hyacinth, ready. 'But if I don't do it, some other poor bastard will.'

'You're not the first!' Osheen blurted suddenly, new information flooding his memory. 'There was another before you!'

Hyacinth shrugged.

'That doesn't change a damn thing.'

With that, Hyacinth touched the sphere, and this particular version of the universe was destroyed.

'This is freaky,' said Kez, waving her arms about as she felt echoes of Hyacinth doing the same, like the afterimage of a feeling. 'It's like we're overlapping.'

'Same exit point I guess,' shrugged Hyacinth. 'So you're the Hyacinth before me?'

'I think you'll find that you're the Kez after me,' said Kez.

'What does that make me?' asked Brodie.

'The warmup Sam,' smiled Sam.

'Uh oh,' said the seventh universe.

Sam turned to Eureka, tears meeting tears as they gazed at each other. At the person who made them better.

'Are you sure about this?' Eureka asked. 'It doesn't have to be you.'

'I know,' smiled Sam, ready. 'But if I don't do it—'

'—some other poor bastard will!' blurted Osheen, layers of memories

crashing over him. ‘Oh God. Please, stop!’

‘There were more before me?’ asked Sam.

Osheen nodded, his brain barely keeping up.

‘Brill,’ chuckled Sam. ‘It’s working.’

With that, Sam touched the sphere, and this particular version of the universe was destroyed.

Kez started to lose count of the number of voices that were around her, let alone the number of bodies inhabiting the same space. ‘Is this going to go on forever?’ she asked anyone who was listening.

‘No,’ replied the two-hundredth universe.

‘Fantastic,’ Kez said, happy to hear that.

‘Time doesn’t exist linearly here. Forever isn’t a concept that matters,’ nodded the forty-fifth universe.

‘Well,’ said the third universe. ‘It might to a being who perceives time in such a way.’

‘Good point,’ said the one-hundred-and-twelfth universe.

‘What’s the point of this place though?’ Kez yelled over the steadily rising tumult. ‘What purpose does it serve?’

‘Austin Lang was correct,’ said the first. ‘Temporally speaking, the universe is all worked out at once.’

‘Linear time is the universe checking if its plan worked out,’ said a universe that had forgotten its number.

‘Like running a program to check for bugs,’ agreed the ninety-second universe. ‘Or a lightning bolt, forking about to find ground.’

‘If it all works out, that’ll be the universe,’ said the first.

‘If not, into the recycle bin,’ said the two-thousand-three-hundred-and-forth universe.

‘So we’re all just the *wrong answers*?!’ shouted Kez.

‘In a manner of speaking we—’ began the third, before it and every other universe fell silent.

‘Oh …’ they all said simultaneously.

A white light exploded into the space, burning the darkness, the universes, and the alternative lives away, leaving just Kez.

‘Hello?’ Kez asked, realising that her feet were now planted firmly on some sort of ground. ‘Universes?’

The white light that had briefly blinded her faded, revealing that she was standing in a small, cubic room, some three metres across. The

walls, floor, and ceiling were pulsing a gentle, slowing white light. Suddenly, one of the walls slid down into the ground, revealing a solitary figure standing on the other side. Dressed in an entirely white outfit, the man stepped into the room, towards Kez, and held out a hand.

'I listened,' said Austin Lang.

Chapter Thirty-One

'Til The End of The End of Time

Kez darted past Austin, into the room beyond. It was huge, clean, and … blurry? The surfaces morphed and faded as Kez looked at them, like she was in a massive magic eye puzzle. Kez spun around, only to lock eyes with a ten-foot-tall, exceptionally lanky humanoid with a side parting atop its large head. It smiled warmly, even after Kez started screaming.

'Kez,' said Austin, approaching slowly, arms extended. 'It's OK, everything's fine.'

Kez grasped behind her, searching for any sort of weapon. Moments later her hand grazed a vase, which she snatched, hurled, and missed with.

'That's fine too,' said Austin, stepping over shards of one of his favourite ornaments.

'Where am I? What's going on?' said Kez, stepping back further, not feeling a wall that she was sure was there a second ago.

'You've not gone far,' said Austin. 'Look outside.'

Kez frantically looked around, a window appearing everywhere she looked. Eventually, she found the right one. Outside, spinning away, was the black hole that *Lucas* had been orbiting. She was sure of it.

'The windows …' Kez asked, looking around, now not seeing any.

'Quantum architecture,' said Austin, lowering his hands slightly. 'Everything, anywhere you need it.'

To prove this he sat on a chair that hadn't been there a second ago. Behind him, the cube's face slid shut again.

'What's that?' Kez asked, pointing at the humanoid that was still towering near her.

'That's Barry,' said Austin. 'An incredible scientist. He even has some stars named after him!'

'What species?'

Austin sat forwards.

'Human,' he smiled.

Kez looked back at this supposed human. The likeness was there, but only if you'd stretched one, doubled the head size, and kept them in the dark for decades.

‘What have you done to him?’ she asked.

‘Me?’ replied Austin. ‘Nothing. Time, evolution, adaption though? Quite a bit.’

Kez looked back at Barry, who was holding out a spindly hand. Still four fingers and a thumb, yet each one had an extra joint. She shook it.

‘Nice to meet you,’ she muttered as Barry went back to work, arms wafting as he walked. A light lit up on the cube, followed by a small alert sound that sounded like a chorus of angels yawning.

‘Last but not least,’ Austin said, hopping up to welcome his new guest. ‘Odd isn’t it, both times now you’ve been here when he arrived.’

‘Who?!’ asked Kez, bewildered. ‘What the ballbag is happening here?!’

The cube’s front face lifted again, to reveal its very last evacuee from a lost universe.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jack, rubbing his arm as a small dot of blood dropped from his nose onto the floor. ‘That sphere gave me a right shock!’

Kez stared in awe as Jack, the Jack she had known for both a short while and millions of years, stood there, exactly the same as the moment he was lost forever. After a time, she rediverted her stare to Austin, who gave her a little shrug.

‘I think it’s time for some answers,’ he smiled.

‘How far?’ Kez asked a short time later, sitting on a bench in a spectacular garden. Lush foliage spread out almost infinitely in all directions, as gravel paths divided everything up into different size and shape rhombuses, and brooks babbled wherever they saw fit to.

‘Hmm?’ Austin asked, distracted by the transparent petals of the flower he was inspecting.

‘In the future,’ Kez said. ‘How far am I in the future?’

‘Oh,’ chuckled Austin. ‘Very.’

‘Millions of years?’ Kez asked.

Austin nodded, gently pouring some perfectly enriched water into the dark soil. ‘Yeah,’ he said warmly. ‘Let’s call it millions.’

Austin placed the now empty watering can down onto the ground, and went and sat next to Kez. They sat silently for a while, watching the bees and butterflies thrive.

‘No more Osheen?’ Kez asked.

‘Osheen was a mask,’ Austin sighed. ‘A shield for my own bad reasoning. I don’t need Osheen Shupple anymore.’

‘OK,’ said Kez. ‘I liked him. Well, for a bit anyway.’

Austin nodded.

‘Kez, I’m sorry for everything I put you through,’ he said. ‘I hurt you in so many ways, and it took me far, far too long to realise that you were right.’

Kez looked over at Austin. The same body she’d seen who knows how long ago, but a very different man inside. She went to reply, but Austin held up a finger.

‘You do not owe me any kind of forgiveness.’

Kez quickly stuffed her first thoughts back down. For a moment, she stared up at the black hole floating above them both, swirling around slowly like an angry pond. ‘How come you’ve not gone mad?’ she asked. ‘With so many timelines, let alone all the years, all sloshing around in your head, how do you keep track of it all? When we switched to a two-week timetable, I missed half my classes.’

‘Upgrades,’ Austin said, tapping his head. ‘Memory for my memory. Accessing them is a little slow, but that might just be age.’

Kez stared at Austin, as one would an unidentifiable insect on the floor of a recently cleaned kitchen.

‘That was a joke,’ Austin muttered.

‘You killed people,’ said Kez. ‘Remember that?’

‘I do,’ replied Austin. ‘All of them.’

‘You killed a child.’

A butterfly landed on the flower Austin had just been watering. Both of them watched as it sat, wings stretching out in the glorious, artificial sunlight.

‘One million, four hundred and thirty thousand, two hundred and six,’ Austin said after a time. ‘That’s how many children died on the day my time machine destroyed London.’

The butterfly fluttered away, excited for the day ahead.

‘Jesus,’ said Kez softly. ‘How do you live with that?’

‘I don’t really have a say in the matter,’ Austin sighed.

Kez looked at Austin with a look she’d learned from her dad. *Go further*, the look would say, diverting a scolding into a moment of self-reflection. Briefly, she wondered if he had a grave she could visit, before suppressing that thought for the time being.

‘There are … bad days,’ Austin said, hands together, eyes on the ground. ‘Bad decades. Ghosts, it turns out, are very much real. I’ve got

a head full of them.'

'Is Theo in there?' Kez asked.

'Multiple times,' nodded Austin. 'One for each timeline.'

Kez stood, angrily kicking some gravel over some pale pink dahlias.

'THIS ISN'T FAIR!' she yelled, scattering some birds in the process. 'You killed them all and now you're getting away with it because you changed your mind? This isn't fair! You don't get to win!'

Austin slowly rose.

'What would be fair then?' he asked. 'What if I was cast into that black hole up there for all eternity?'

'That's not what I—' Kez began, her cheeks reddening.

'Then what?' Austin asked, his voice stern but calm. 'What has to happen to me for you to consider this a victory?'

Kez didn't respond. Austin took a step forward.

'I know this seems impossible to understand, cruel even. Because of me, we both lost. Our lives are scarred, never to go back to the way they were. So, we both have a choice here. Do we drag each other down, losing forever, searching for an impossible win, or do we try to do what is right?'

'I don't know,' Kez replied quietly, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

'Of course you don't,' Austin smiled. 'How could you? You've had minutes. I've had aeons, and I'm still not sure.'

He pointed up, beyond the black hole, to the galaxies above. 'Out there, the entire universe is now at peace. The Affinity and an uncountable amount of other groups just like it merged together. It took them a long, long time, but now, the universe is kind.'

Austin chuckled, memories flittering about. An entire history in a single man's head.

'You're no longer in control?'

Austin shook his head.

'Not since you,' he said. 'It's been tough. We still argue over ideas and policy, but I realised something. A utopia isn't a single idea. It's a discussion. We just know we're on the same page now, fighting for the same goals.'

Austin's eye caught something in one of his flower beds. Shears were drawn, used, and re-pocketed.

'We're getting there,' he sighed. 'One conversation at a time.'

'Do you still think about them?' Kez asked.

'Natalie, Harker, and Oliver?' Austin asked. 'Yes, often.'

'Ever remarry?'

‘A few times.’

‘Kids?’

Austin nodded, a sad smile falling over his face.

‘That’s the one advantage of being immortal,’ he said. ‘The loss is never on their side.’

‘You’ve seen some loss,’ Kez replied.

‘I have,’ nodded Austin. ‘But thanks to some advice I finally listened to a long, long time ago, I stopped letting it define me.’

Kez smiled softly. Austin returned it.

‘Where’s Jack?’ Kez wondered, only just realising that he’d been carted off elsewhere.

‘He’s getting his nose fixed up,’ said Austin. ‘You did a number on him.’

‘Is he going to … future … prison?’ Kez asked, reddening slightly.

‘We don’t have anything like that here,’ Austin said. ‘No, he’ll soon be departing for a small job back in his universe. After that, it’s up to him.’

‘And me?’ Kez asked. ‘Where do I go?’

‘Home,’ nodded Austin. ‘However, before you go, I’d like your help with something.’

‘What?’ Kez asked, narrowing her eyes.

‘Do you remember that dark space? The one I pulled you away from?’

The idea rang a bell, quite faint and far away. There were others there. People. Something else.

‘Sort of,’ shrugged Kez.

‘That is the resting place of the abandoned timelines,’ Austin said, mercifully not bringing up any sort of confusing projection. ‘When a paradox forms, the universe is discarded and replaced with a new one, slightly different. I thought it was my time machine’s doing, but it turns out it’s just physics. Time still exists there, but not in a way that we understand. It’s like it’s a foreign language; we can see that it *is* time, we just can’t understand what it’s saying.’

‘What are *you* saying?’ asked Kez.

‘Well, we found it,’ said Austin, unable to hide his smile. ‘We’ve saved the lost souls like you from it, and now it’s time to turn our attention to the multitudes of universes that are still there.’

‘You’re going to travel to abandoned universes?’ Kez asked, eyes so narrow she could barely see through them.

‘No,’ said Austin, beaming happily. ‘We’re going to save them, Kez.

We're going to save all of them.'

Kez gasped as she entered Austin's laboratory, mostly because he had omitted the fact that it was the size of a large stadium. From the massive white dome above, thousands of neatly arranged cables spiralled down and split off, each one leading to a chair, pulsing out from the centre of the room in concentric circles.

In each chair sat a human, roughly Kez's age. All eyes fell on her as Austin led her to the centre ring of seating. She sat in the only available seat, between two people who introduced themselves as Hyacinth and Brodie, leaving Austin to stand in the centre of the room where cables began snaking around his body, wiring him in.

Briefly he addressed his audience, explaining that each person here had experienced the dark place after confronting him. He was going to use those connections to uncover this lost realm, and then restore these lost universes, pulling them from the void. After a few questions, he began.

From the ground, Austin's dead body was raised. It too was wired into cables, and soon it stood back to back with Austin, in the centre of it all. As the room observed both, Austin existed in both states. He was alive and dead. Lost, and found. Broken, yet finally whole. Things Kez didn't even slightly understand all happened at once. Readouts projected from her chair showed the black hole *Lucas* once orbited torn apart for energy, fluttering away into nothing. An odd feeling swept across her, like she was leading a carnival procession over her own grave. The first universe arrived, taking up a place in the void around this one. Then, more came, faster and faster, filling out the void. The word 'cascade' appeared on screen, as paradoxes within paradoxes unravelled, and each splinter universe took up a new residence. Old universes heaved into view, while several big bangs snapped into existence, an unthinkable distance away. As Austin explained that they weren't the only universe doing this, the machine finished its work. Moments later the dome above fell away, revealing the new universe. It was day.

Day in space.

Everywhere Kez looked, universes shone, creating an endless field of stars, glittering away, filling the gaps in the dark with light. An uncountable amount of life, once lost, had now been given a second

chance. Cheers broke out across the laboratory, as Kez came to realise the extent of all that was above her. Her fight hadn't just saved her timeline, it had saved all of them.

'Bathrooms here are fucking weird,' Kez said a few hours later, re-entering the room she'd arrived in. 'You call this a utopia?'

Austin chuckled as he waved a vanishing Brodie away, turning back to the results that Barry was collating.

'So, we broke the speed of light?' Austin laughed.

'I thought we did that in the 2100s?' Hyacinth asked, eating the great-great-grandchild of the banana.

'It is broken,' said Barry. 'As in, destroyed.'

'Light now appears to be instant across the universe,' Austin read. 'Fascinating.'

'Not instant,' corrected Barry. 'As we can still see colour, it must have a wavelength, thus be oscillating, thus not instantaneous.'

'You're assuming that colour still works the same way,' Austin sighed happily. He had so many physics textbooks to rewrite.

'Time travel in its current form has ceased function also,' said Barry. 'As predicted.'

'Thank fuck for that,' chuckled Hyacinth, dropping the banana skin into a bin that wasn't there a second ago, entering the cube, and vanishing back into her universe.[fn61]

'You're up, Kez,' said Austin, indicating the empty cube. 'Life where you left it.'

'Right then,' said Kez, making her way to it. 'What should I expect?'

'The moment you left syncs up to the moment your universe entered ours,' said Austin, setting coordinates for the last time. 'So it'll be a few hours since you left. The time machine will no longer work and—'

'I meant, what should I expect from Osheen?' Kez asked.

Austin paused for a moment, thinking back.

'He's scared. Lashing out. Too much power and not enough help.'

'Do I need to fix him?' asked Kez.

'No,' smiled Austin. 'You've done so much. Just let the Affinity deal with him. Trust me, he'll come around eventually.'

The cube began to light up around Kez, preparing to send her the length of several hundred universes.

'Just one more question,' Kez said.

The cube powered down.

'Just one?'

'Now that time travel is gone … are you still immortal?'

'I don't actually know,' Austin shrugged. 'Guess I'll find out one day.'

The cube powered up.

'Wait, one more.'

The cube powered down.

'Yes?'

'Won't the endless light in the sky mess up like, animals and stuff?'

'No, Kez,' smiled Austin. 'We prepared for this eventuality with simulation-based shielding around planets.'

'Right, OK,' said Kez. 'I'm ready to go.'

The cube powered up.

'Austin?'

The cube powered down.

'Kez?'

'What about my dead body?' she asked. 'In the past. I still have to die, right?'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' said Austin, waving the thought away. 'We sent an artificial version of all of you back aeons ago, among a few other things. It was actually how we confirmed the machine was working.'

Kez sighed in relief.

The cube powered up.

Kez raised a hand.

The cube powered down.

'I do actually have other work to do today,' Austin smiled.

'Why me?' Kez asked quietly.

Austin walked over to Kez and held out both his hands, palms up. Kez, after a moment's hesitation, held them.

'We used to think that about the Earth,' he said softly. 'Why was this paradise built for us? The answer is, it wasn't. Earth and the life on it existed together. Without one, we wouldn't have the other.'

Kez had a headache, but for once, not from a conversation with Austin.

'The universe is the same. Without life, it would be unobserved, pointless. With life, well, we tend to mess things up. Maybe that was the point. Maybe this is all some grand destiny, and maybe the universe up there is how it was meant to be all along.'

Kez looked out of a window that was both there and not at the same

time. Beyond it, universes glittered.

'But I don't think the universe chose you,' Austin continued. 'This was simply the way the universe had to be, or it wouldn't be.'

'So,' said Kez wryly. 'What you're saying is that I am the most special, important person in the entire universe?'

Austin chuckled and went back to his console.

'It's fascinating,' he said. 'You've bookended my journey. The very first glimpse of the future that set me on my path, and here, at the very end of time travel itself.'

'Great, I'm a footnote,' Kez said sarcastically.[fn62]

'Maybe,' said Austin. 'Or, maybe we're intertwined. You know, every other version of you also had a parent called Harker. Maybe it had to be that way. Maybe it was coincidence. I doubt we'll ever know.'

Austin tapped a key, adding a new notification to Kez's eyesight. The same gift he'd given every single alternate Kez. A series of coordinates. A small satellite, orbiting an unmarked star.

'Mum?' Kez asked, her throat tightening.

Austin nodded. 'Good luck, Kezia,' he said. 'And thank you.'

Kez nodded back, vanishing across the universes before her tears hit the ground, free to face whatever kind of life she wanted to.

With the final lost soul sent home, the cube folded itself away neatly, never to be used again. Austin sighed, offered a slight smile to Barry, and turned to leave.

He heard a crunch.

An undiscovered fragment of priceless art, the one Kez had hurled at him when she arrived, had shattered under his weight. He bent down to pick it up, accidentally cutting himself on one of the severed edges of porcelain.

Austin's heart soared as a small bead of blood appeared on his fingertip. Then, with a tiny twitch, the blood vanished, taking with it the wound the vase had left on his skin. Austin stared at his fingertip for a while longer.

'Damn,' he whispered to himself.

With that he took a breath, bid Barry a good night, and decided to head up to his garden for a couple of hours. A smile lit up his face as he wondered how it looked now, bathed in the light of the white night's sky.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Epilogue

THE OCTAHEDRON | 2784

Three months after the war, Osheen Shupple was sitting in a plush armchair, the only piece of furniture in his dark cell. With a heavy sigh he stood and tramped over to one of the thick glass walls that penned him in on all sides. He gazed through, past the reflection of his own white jumpsuit and torn skin grafts, to his visitor.

'Hello, Osheen,' Fatoumata said through the holes in the glass, Baxter sitting to their side. 'Settling in?'

Osheen looked back into his cell. A single white armchair, bolted in the centre of a glass octahedron. Behind each pane, he was watched, endlessly, from eight space stations, each with individual security and personnel. Every race of the Affinity keeping a close eye on him, forever.

'It'll do,' he shrugged

Fatoumata smiled, before revealing something from behind their back.

'Something to read,' they said, sliding it into a purpose-built slot. The slot whirred briefly, scanning the delivery and locking down Fatoumata's side before opening Osheen's.

'A gift from Eureka,' they said as Osheen took it into his hands. 'This is the book that inspired her to be a hero. She hopes it does the same for you.'

Osheen stared down at the book, past the illustration of a woman in a space suit flying a red and white rocket, to the name at the bottom. A name he knew all too well.

Natalie Lang.

Osheen started to laugh. Not because anything was funny, or sad, or ironic. He laughed because it's all he had left to do.

'I offered you order,' he said, frisbeeing the book behind him. 'Structure. Control. Now all you have left is chaos. Is that what you want?'

Osheen banged both of his fists against the glass.

'The moment you come up against any danger, you'll splinter into a

thousand tribes and never know peace again. Believe me, the first threat to your way of life will *wipe you out*.'

Fatoumata smiled. That damn smile.

'No, you didn't.'

They turned to leave, Baxter following.

'Where's my body, Fatoumata?' Osheen yelled through the glass. 'Tell me, *now*.'

Fatoumata shook their head, vanishing into the darkness beyond the glass.

'WHERE'S MY FUCKING BODY?!'

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND | 2784

'I hate waiting,' Lily complained, stopping her pacing to glance up at the departures board, desperate to know which matter courier she'd be boarding from.

'It won't be long now,' Eureka said from the chair next to hers, feet up on their suitcase, nose in a magazine. 'Just a few minutes.'

Lily flopped into the chair next to Eureka and rested her head on her shoulder, causing red hair to obscure the majority of Eureka's copy of *Starship Exteriors Digest*.

'I always thought we'd be adventurers, heading to an uncharted galaxy,' Lily sighed. 'Not … tourists.'

'We're not tourists,' Eureka said from under her large floppy hat. 'We're on a mission!'

She kicked the suitcase with the back of her foot, shaking its contents. Some clothes, a few toiletries, and an urn.

'Ugh,' shrugged Lily. 'I suppose that'll do.'

Eureka chuckled and kissed her wife on the head. Suddenly, Lily bolted upright, nearly knocking Eureka's teeth out.

'Matter Courier 6b!' she exclaimed, pulling Eureka up by the arm. 'Let's go!'

'Andromeda here we come,' Eureka said, wandering off with Lily, their suitcase following alongside them.

'Andromeda, eh?' a Clive said, heading in the same direction as them. 'First time?'

'Yep,' beamed Eureka. 'Bit of a life goal to be honest.'

'Well, you're in luck!' said the Clive. 'We've got an election year coming up and Clive politics are a sight to behold.'

‘Interesting,’ said Lily, uninterested.

‘Any strong frontrunners?’ asked Eureka. ‘A hundred more years of Clive?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ chuckled the Clive. ‘As much as the human form is fun, I’d like something a little different this time.’

‘Good call,’ said Eureka. ‘A change is as good as the rest.’

‘Exactly,’ said the man. ‘Then again, the Eureka Shine lot are out in force at the moment so, who knows? Maybe I’ll have to put up with knees and all that again.’

Lily and Eureka froze.

‘The … Eureka Shine lot?’ Eureka asked, her eyes twinkling behind her disguise.

‘Oh yes,’ said the Clive, jumping up onto matter courier 6b. ‘That woman from all the statues. Ever since all that information came out about her crew, people have fallen in love with her all over again.’ With that, he vanished.

‘No,’ said Lily after a moment. ‘I refuse to visit Planet of the Eurekas.’

Eureka turned to her, beaming wildly.

‘No, Eureka, I mean it.’

‘I have always wanted to get into politics,’ Eureka laughed, grabbing Lily and pulling her up onto the matter courier as their luggage followed.

‘NO!’ Lily yelled, disbelief and joy cutting through her words. ‘ONE OF YOU IS ENOUGH!’

With that, and one last smooch on planet Earth, Eureka and Lily vanished, happy, and together.

NON-AFFINITY SPACE | 2784

‘Captain on the bridge,’ Bea chirped, whizzing about in her new sphere as Alphonse strode into the room.

‘At ease,’ he said to his mostly Besalt crew, a grin bubbling across his entire face as he stood in front of the viewscreen, an uncharted world in the distance, hands behind his back. ‘What do we have?’

‘Heatstroke,’ said Bea. ‘You mind turning down the temperature a bit?’

‘I didn’t think you could feel heat?’ Alphonse chuckled, nodding for some air conditioning to be turned on, whatever good that would do

against the open pools of lava on the bridge floor.

'I can feel my circuits melting,' Bea chuckled. 'I'll have to modify—'

Suddenly, the ship lurched backwards, sending everyone but Bea onto their arses.

'Report,' Alphonse roared.

'We hit something invisible,' a Besalt at the back of the room roared, flicking on the main viewscreen to support his claim. There was nothing there.

'Damage?'

'None,' reported a second Besalt.

'Hold this position,' Alphonse said, nodding to the appropriate crewman. 'Deep scans.'

'Sir, whatever it is, it's hailing us,' the communication Besalt said, a large rocky instrument sticking out of one ear.

'Patch them through,' Alphonse said, taking a seat. Moments later he was looking at a dark brown cube, its fleshy sides moist.

'This is Captain Alphonse of—'

Suddenly, Alphonse's mind filled with a story. A youth, hiding in an alien forest, something large and dark looking for them, ripping trees aside, spreading fear. The vision faded as fast as it came, leaving Alphonse breathless.

'Woah. Anyone else feel that?' he asked the room at large. Nobody had.

'I wonder …' Alphonse pondered, closing his eyes and focusing. He replayed the story as best as he could. The youth, the forest, but this time, no monster. Just him. He reached out to the youth, offering it a hand, filling his mind with peace and kindness.

'Captain!' Bea exclaimed, causing Alphonse to open his eyes. In front of them, a ship now floated, as brown and fleshy as the cube. Behind them, more ships lowered their invisibility fields.

'Did you just make first contact?' asked Bea.

'I think so, yeah,' grinned Alphonse.

'Well, go on then.'

'Go on then, what?'

Bea shook her shell. Organic life, they were so useless. 'Ask them over for dinner,' she laughed.

Alphonse laughed as he closed his eyes, diplomacy flowing from his mind as, beyond him, the invisibility cloak fell from an entire world, revealing the buildings, streets, and life of a hitherto unknown civilisation.

LAKE BOSUMTWI | 2,497,963 BC

Jack landed in the past, back where it all started. He checked the beacon, now a tiny device strapped to his wrist, and headed off in the direction it indicated, hacking thick bushes out of his way with a strengthened machete. *He's moved*, he thought to himself, noting the change in scenery. *Good sign.*

Jack pushed on, eventually emerging onto a shoreline, golden sandy beaches and dark rocks extending in both directions as water lapped gently at the shore.

Well, he thought to himself. *When in Rome.*

Using a nearby tree for stability, Jack kicked his boots off and carried them as he slowly meandered across the beach. There was no point in rushing; all he had to look forward to after this was prison, followed by a complete rebuilding of his life. Might as well enjoy the sand.

After a time, Jack caught an unexpected scent. Smoke. Ahead, he spotted a clearing, deliberately cut into the foliage by the beach. Jack rounded the final few trees, machete in hand, just to be safe.

'AUGH!' Jack screamed, making the object of his startlement turn around.

'Jack!' yelled a man with an incredibly thick beard, arms extended in welcome. 'Well, this is unexpected! How the hell are you?'

'Theo!' Jack yelled, pointing unnecessarily. 'You're naked!'

'Oh, don't be the guy who invents prudishness,' Theo tutted. 'Sit down, let me get the kettle on.'

Jack squatted onto a log, watching as Theo took a clearly handmade clay pot to a nearby stream. He filled it, causing Jack to heavily avert his eyes, then placed it onto the open fire in the centre of the clearing.

'Fair warning,' Theo smiled. 'This takes *hours*.'

'Theo,' Jack said. 'We thought you were dying here. I've come to *rescue* you.'

'Oh,' said Theo, reclining on a handmade deckchair. 'From what? Paradise?'

Jack looked around, taking in Theo's abode. Around the clearing, several tables had been constructed, each filled with makeshift tools or ornaments. In the centre, a small farm grew all sorts of fruits and vegetables; a stream cut through it, assisting irrigation. Above that, suspended from a tree branch, was what appeared to be a large,

covered basket, intricately woven and, presumably, where Theo slept at night.

'Apparently,' whistled Jack. 'How did you manage to build all of this so quickly?'

Theo laughed, plucking an unbelievably plump-looking berry from one of his plants and scoffing it.

'It's been three years, Jack,' Theo said, throwing a berry to him. 'I've had quite a bit of time to build all this.'

'Three years?' exclaimed Jack. 'Typical Osheen. Bloody useless tech.'

'Ah, how is the old bastard?' Theo asked, going in for another berry.

'That is a *long* story,' shrugged Jack.

'Is it now?' smiled Theo. 'You have anywhere else to be?'

Jack glanced down at the beacon on his wrist. Its countdown ticked on, giving them an hour or so before the future pulled them both back.

'Ah,' said Theo. 'You do.'

Jack looked out at the ocean, its deep blue waves crashing over the golden shore, framed by a sloping canopy of green branches and leaves. Further out, an orange sun hung low in the sky, speckling photons across the surface of the water. Theo was right. This was paradise.

'I might stick around,' Jack nodded to himself, unstrapping the beacon from his wrist. 'If you don't mind that is.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Theo. 'I'd love a roommate.'

Jack nodded, took a second to be sure, and obliterated the beacon on a rock, smashing it over and over again until it fell into pieces.

'That'll do it,' chuckled Theo.

'Right then,' Jack said, standing up. 'I'm off for a swim, and then this evening, I'm going to invent playing cards.'

'Prudishness *and* gambling?' chuckled Theo to himself, watching Jack run into the distance. 'There goes paradise.'

MESSIER 54 | 2784

The creature roared again, a colossal fist punching through yet another skyscraper. Debris crashed to the ground, obliterating a highway as the last few residents boarded the escape balloon.

'COME ON,' Iscah yelled over the noise of collapsing buildings, ushering aliens out of the underground transport hub they'd holed up in. 'IT'S NOT SAFE HERE ANYMORE.'

The monster's tail swung overhead, causing nearby power cables to rip out of their connectors. 'Anyone left?' Iscah asked the last person to emerge. They shrugged three shoulders inconclusively as they passed, galloping for the last balloon. Iscah watched them go, one half of her wanting to climb on board and escape, the other half already down the stairs. 'HELLO?' she called out as she reached the main platform. 'ANYONE HERE?'

A muffled roar of the monster caused debris to rain down from the ceiling, clattering on the roofs of abandoned trains. There was another noise. Voices. Desperate ones.

Iscah followed the sound, quickly discovering an entire train carriage full of people, its doors held shut by a fallen pillar. She threw her weight into it, pushing it aside with a roar of her own, and began escorting the aliens to the surface.

'INCOMING!'

As they broke cover, Iscah spotted a chunk of building crashing towards them. With no time to get out of the way, she pulled two of the closest aliens under her, shielding them from the collapse as best she could.

'Ugh, you're such a hero.'

Iscah looked up to see Morag above the lot of them, new golden arms extended, holding the debris at bay.

'I wondered where you got to,' Iscah exclaimed, guiding the aliens out from the shadow and towards their escape.

'Been chatting to the pilot,' Morag said, letting the building complete its journey towards the ground. 'They can't take off yet. There's a risk the big feller will look this way and swipe them out of the sky.'

'Right,' said Iscah, watching the monster rampage in the distance. 'What can we do?'

'Cause a distraction,' said Morag. 'They only need ten minutes.'

'A distraction?' Iscah exclaimed in disbelief. 'There's an army shooting at it and it barely notices. What could we possibly do to distract it?'

'Well,' said Morag, pretending to kick a pebble away. 'There is *one* thing we could do.'

'Don't say it,' Iscah said, pointing a finger. 'I'm warning you, Morag. Don't say it.'

Morag moved herself over to Iscah, pressing her own face into the side of her vat. 'Rodeo,' she said, grinning a fanged grin.

Iscah shook her head as she matched Morag's grin and, with a

squeeze of the sphere in her palm, joined her in a sprint towards the monster.

STAR 2MASS J1941-4602 STATION ALPHA | 2784

'That's incredible,' said Kez. 'Give us a twirl!'

E-NA spun around in her new robotic body. It was gangly, slightly rusted, and still used USB J ports, but she couldn't be happier.

'Steady!' Kez's dad said, heaving a massive box past the two of them and placing it onto the trolley. 'I've only just organised these diagnostic cables.'

'What happened to retiring?' Kez chuckled, helping her dad with the next heap of wires he refused to throw out.

'These are *recreational* wires,' he laughed, kissing Kez on the forehead as he ran the trolley to the matter courier.

'Does Fred know yet?' E-NA asked as he dropped out of earshot. 'About the house?'

'Nope,' said Harker, entering with a small box of memorabilia. 'He still thinks it's brand new.'

'I wish I could see the look on his face when he realises it's a shithole,' chuckled Kez. 'He'll be so happy.'

'The term is fixer-upper,' said Harker. 'Well, fixer-upper isn't quite strong enough a term …'

'Shithole,' Kez mouthed at E-NA, causing both of them to fall about laughing.

'Your transport just arrived,' Harker said, pointing at the Homeship that had just appeared outside the station. 'Off you go, you two, education awaits. Again.'

'Yeah, but we're doing it properly this time,' said Kez, straightening up her engineering badge.

'Just don't copy my homework,' said E-NA.

'We're taking different courses,' said Kez, heaving a suitcase off the floor.

'Then take the advice,' laughed E-NA.

With simultaneous kisses on Harker's cheeks, the two of them left the room, heading down to the matter courier. Harker watched them go, her heart so very proud.

‘Be safe, my lovely,’ Fred said, squeezing Kez tight. ‘Try to stay out of trouble this time.’

‘Trouble?’ scoffed Kez. ‘I was never in trouble last time.’

‘Kez,’ Fred said. ‘The universe is fundamentally different now because of you. You changed *physics*.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Kez, her words loaded with an off-handed swagger. ‘Everyone rebels at uni.’

Her dad laughed, snatching her up for another cuddle.

‘I’ll be safe, Dad,’ she said, squeezing him back. ‘The worst you have to worry about is tattoos and pregnancy.’

‘I’d rather you changed physics again,’ Fred said, semi-seriously.

‘Cases loaded,’ said E-NA. ‘Time for the surprise.’

‘Surprise?’ Fred asked, looking between the two of them suspiciously. ‘Don’t you think you’ve given your old man enough of them in the last few weeks?’

‘Just one more,’ smiled Kez. ‘I know you’re worried about the station falling apart after you leave, so … I pulled some strings. Got a replacement.’

‘A replacement?’ scoffed Fred. ‘There’s nobody in this universe that could do the job that I—’

‘Good morning,’ beamed the replacement, appearing on the matter courier. ‘Kez. E-NA. Fred, I assume.’

‘Dad,’ said Kez. ‘This is Malcolm.’

‘A pleasure,’ said Malcolm, floating over to Fred and shaking his hand with a tendril. ‘I have heard much about you.’

‘I …’ Fred began, looking his replacement up and down. ‘I like your hat.’

‘Thank you,’ said Malcolm, doffing the Stetson hovering above him like a cowboy’s halo. ‘It is a casual look, to indicate my retirement from active duty.’

‘It suits you,’ beamed Kez, just as a red warning appeared in her vision. ‘Oh shit, we’re late.’

‘Starting as we mean to go on,’ E-NA said as the two of them leapt onto the matter courier.

‘Take care, my loves,’ Fred said, waving them off. ‘Try not to go looking for plots to end the universe.’

‘Oh, Dad,’ smiled Kez, blowing him a kiss. ‘The plots to end the universe find *us*.’

With that, Kez and E-NA vanished.

‘They will be OK,’ Malcolm said. ‘I promise you that.’

‘It’s not them I’m worried about,’ chuckled Fred, sighing happily and escorting Malcolm to the engine room to show him exactly what mess he’d gotten himself into. Outside, the Homeship departed, skipping across space into the endless universes beyond.

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Matilda, Lilith, Eli, Soup, Simon, Reuben, Jeff, Ford, Lucas, Rhys, Kenny, Hilda, Brie, Samantha, Twinkle, Fern, Mabel, Robert, Francis, Holly, Roz, Diana, Carla and Midge. Our furry, feathered, and scaly family. No, we don't have a rescuing problem. We can stop anytime we want.

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Rory Doherty
Tristan Doherty
Jack Doig
Dion Dokter
Dominique
Harley Donaldson
Lee Donaldson
Stephen Donegan
Matthew Doney
Drew Doniger
David Banister Donne

Darryl Donnelly
Emma Donohue (emdo54)
Frost Donovan
Matthew Donovan
doodlejule
Thijs Doornbos
Doot.T.Skeleton
William Doran
Adam Doré
Steffen Dörner
Robbert Dorrestein
Chris Douglas
Christopher Douglas
Miles Douglas-Mudie
Kurt Dove
Josh Downard
Jon Downey
Matthew Dowse
Dan “MackemDan” Dowson
Stephen Dowson
Anna Doyle
Graham Doyle
Jean-Raphaël Doyon
Kaycie Draggoo
Nathan Drake
Thomas Drake
Lykon Drakensken
Jack Draper
Jack Driffill
Rhys Drinkwater
Fuck DRM
Alex Dry
Nathan (Chibnall is a hack) Dryburgh
Harry Dryden
Manie du Preez
Jack Duarte
Tim Dubbelman
Samuel Duckworth
James Duda
Nathan Dudek

Bethany Dudley
Antony Duerdoth
Richard Duff
Robert Duffield
Snowden Duffield
Boden Duffy
Daniel Duffy
Edward “Meerkat” Duffy
Ryan Dufrene
Thomas Dufresne
Friedrich Duge
Zack Duggins
Olaf Duinmaijer
Cassia Duma
Samantha Dumanski
Neon Dunbar
Tyler Dunbar
Ryan Duncan
Cameron Dunk
Nathan Dunlap
Alexandria Dunlop
Tom Dunmore
Alex Dunn
Anthony Dunn
James Dunn
Kerry Dunne
Michael Duntz
Nicholas DuPuis
Leigh Dupuy
Riley Durham
Ashley Durnall
Sestiva Duskblood
Abigail Duske
Jeff Duvall
Nathan Dwyer
Mason Dyas
Martin Dyer
Patrick Cowper Dyer
Tommy J. Dyer II
Thomas Dyke

Dylann
Dyson
Harry Dyson-Coope
Peter Eardley
Annmarie Earl
Ryan Earles
Liam Earnshaw
Matthew Earwaker
Thomas Easden
Lewis Eason
Mitchell S Easter
Harry Easton
Oliver Easton
Ethan Eastwood
Emily Eaton
Jason Eaves
Jonathan Ebsworth
Moritz Eckrich
Matthew Edge
Simon Cosmo Edge
Kyle Edmond
Michael Edmonston
Alli Edwards
Ben Edwards
Cerys Edwards
Curtis Edwards
Daniel Edwards
James Edwards
Nathan Edwards
Paul Edwards
Tegan Edwards
Tessa Edwards
Thomas David Edwards
Tobias Edwards
Toby Edwards
Alfie Edwards-Wainwright
Harry Efstathiades
Matthew Egan
Matthew Eggleston
Joshua Ehlers

Brennan Ehrenkaufer
Carolin Eichhorn
Anthony Eickelman
Nolan Eide
Kent Eigengrau
Henrik Eikrem
Holly Eisentraut
Martin Ek
Alice Elberfeld
Natalie-Marie Elcock
Tactician Elgah
David Elgie
Magically Eli
Amy Elizabeth
Katie Elizabeth
Cai Ellerton
Ellie, Alex
Sarah Ellingson
Adam Elliott
Ashley Elliott
Brandon Elliott
Stephen Elliott
Ayran Ellis
Daniel Ellis
James Ellis
Kate Ellis
Xander Ellis
Lewis Ellison
Clayton Eltis
Robbie Elvin
Jennifer Emanuel
Aaron Emerson
Todd Emert
Scott Emery
Nilena Engi
Harry England
Albin Engström
Phil Entwisle
Patrick Erhard
Oscar Eriksson

Zach Ernst
Eruti
Lin Eschenfelder
Sam Escott
Bryn Escott-Allen
Russell Escueta
Lisa Marleen Esselink, Edward Holmwood
Joel Esson
Ben Estelle
Justin Estrellado
Benjamin Etchells (Etchasketch101)
Sean Ettlin
Kenji Eva
Evan & Uri
Andy Evans
Bailey Evans
Cameron Evans
Carey Evans
Christine Evans
Courtney Evans
Daniel Evans
Dylan Evans
Ellis Evans
Frazier Evans
Harry Evans
Ian Evans
Iwan Evans
Kaleb Evans
Lily Evans
Luke Evans
Mark Evans
Martyn Evans
Owen Evans
Tom Evans
Zack Evans
Zak Evans
Fjodor Everaerts
Alex Everett
Ben Everitt
Matthew Everitt

Kristine Evje
James Ewart
Daymara Excel
Ezri 42
Jamie Faben
Jack Fabian
Fabnie
Ben (Val) Fagan
Chris Fagg
Harley Faggetter
Nicky Fahey
Liam Fahy
Blake Fairburn
Tejay Fairfax
Becky Scott Fairley
Stephen Falconer
Luke Falgate
Indivar Falk
Ryan Fallon
Henry Family
Cameron Fanelli
Toni Fargher
Lewis Farmer
Rob Farmer
Trent Farmer
Drew Farr
Jennifer Farr
Thomas Farran
Emlyn Farrell
Jen Farrell
George Farren
Michael Fase
Danny Faulkner
Matthew Favaloro
Jake Fawcett
Cynthia Fay
Carol-Ann Fazakarley
Elowyn Fearne
Barry Featherston
Zach Federer

Ava Federspiel
Declan Feehily
Conor Feeney
Simon Feist
Felix
Morgan Fell
Paddy Fellows
Liam Felstark
Richard Felton
James Fenney
Carter Fensterstock
Georgio Rocco Ferdinand
Andrew Ferguson
Cameron Ferguson
Euan Ferguson
Owen Ferguson
Sam Young Ferguson
Stuart Ferguson
Jack Fermor-Worrell
Alexander Fernandez
Javier Cabral Ferraro
Toby Ferrian
Ferrie
Misty Ferrol
Botond Fertoi
Ferzy
Quinton Feser
Havvord Fhax
Steven Fice
Oliver Fiddy
Josh Field
Aaron Fielder
Connor “Megagaming073” Fielder
Anna E Figueroa
Mackenzie Fikkers
Ian Files
Amanda Filipsson
Filo
James Finch
Lucas Finch

Hillel Finder
Christoffer Finjarn
Daniel Fink
Caila Finn
Jack Finn
Jonathan Finn
Max Firestorm
Verity Firth
Louise Fisher
Paul Fisher
Samantha Fisher
Daniel Fitch
Simon Fitch
Ceri Fitzgerald
Robert “Ghost” Fitzgerald
Arthur Fitzjohn
Euan Fitzpatrick
Luke Fitzpatrick
Joseph Fitzsimons
Arcane Flame
Owen Flannery
Alex Flather
Arran Flay
Robert Fleetham
Nathan Fleming
Brandon Fletcher
Hunter Fletcher
Will Fletcher
Jonathan Fletcher, Fletcher, Samantha Richardson
Callum Flett
Callum Flinn
Miah Flint
Sherman Flipse
Alistair Flood
Lee Flood
James A Florance
Che Florett
Anthony Flower
Liam Flowers
Julian Flum

Colm Flynn
Kai Flynn
Tyler Foehlinger
Paul Fogarty
Stephen Foley
Linus Follert
Matthew Ford
Ross Ford
Denzel Ford | meoware
Callum Forrest
Shaun Forrest
Jayke Forshaw
Joe Forster, Rowan Priest
Amy Forsyth
Ryan Forsyth
Cutler Fortner
Ole Steffen Fosseide
Alfie Foster
Benjaman Foster
Blake S Foster
Edward Foster
Kit Foster
Layton Foster
Russell Foster
Wyatt Foster
Daniel Fountain
Joshua Fowler
Matt Fowler
Nick Fowler
Reece Fowler
Emma Fox
Tom Fox
Spencer Foxworth, Courtney Foxworth
Roger Fracalossi
Andrew Frame
Rhys France
David Francis
Owen Francis
Sylvain Francis
Michael Francisco

Diane Frank
Alex Franke
Sam Frankel
Kyllian Franken
Felix Frankenberg
Harry Franklin
Christopher Franks
Catrìona Fraser
Jamie Fraser
Fraser & Ellie
Louis Freeman
Liam Freeman-Nock
Benjamin Frege
Gill French
Freya The Gay Gargoyle
Jack Friedman
Daniel Friel
Alexandre Frigon
FrogSkeleton
James Frost
Luke Frost
Rosie Fruin, Judi Horspole
Christian Fry
David Fryer
Alexander Fucher
Victor Fugl
Ethan Fulbright
Luke Fuller
Travis Fuller
FullFledgedFox
Leanne Furness
Andrew Furze
Joseph Fustolo
FutureForce14
Samuel Fyffe
Little Fysh
Andrew G
Ash G
Christian G
Peter G

G
Matthew Gabbard
Markus Gabrielsen
Frank Gabršek
Arshad Gaffar
Adam Gaffney
Aleksandr Galaktionov
David Gallagher
Matthew Kavan Gallagher
Rachael Galley
Arran Gallon
Kyle Galloway
Pedro Galveias
Andrew Gamble
Christopher Gamble
Richard Paul Gamblin
Nacho Typical Gamer
Josh Gaming
Woodsy's Gaming
Manuel Garat
Alyssia Garber
Andrew Garbett, Tyler Garbett
Savi Garcelon
Dan Gardiner
George Gardner
Pip Gardner
Iain Garioch
Welf Garkisch
Beau Garland
Katie Garner
Peter Garner
Angela Garofalo
Devon Garrett
Ryan Garrett
Weston Garrett
Jack Garrison
Zoey Garside
Jamie Garvey
Ozone Garvey
Stephen Garvey

DJ Garwood-DeLong
Stan Gaskell
Ruby Gatt
Forrest Gauch
Danny Gauger
Frazer Gault
Sam Gawith
Chris Gawthrop-Bleet
Ehren Gay
Gwendoline Gay
Robert H. Gaydon, Victoria Lyne
Orion Gazi
Balázs Géczi
Alice Gee
Zoe Zachery Gee
Enrico Geerts
J. Geestman
Patrick Gelvin
Graeme Gemin
Niall Geoghegan
Alex Georgalla
Callum George
George
Dani Georgieva
Sebastian Gepperth
Justin Gerhardt
Ethan Gerstein
Juneau Getrum
Jasper Gharaby
Ghiacciato
Ghost 090294
Wilf Gibbens
Eleanor Starship Gibbon, Hannah Mudd (<3)
Bobby Gibbons
Laura Gibbs
Carla Gibson
Jennifer Gibson
Oliver Gibson
Sami Gibson
Tom Gidden

Ryan Gilbertson
Opal Gilchrist
Reece Giles
Mike Gilfillan
Ethan Gill
Josh Gill
Isaac Gillam-Lindo
Gabriel Gillespie
Joanna Gillespie
Lily Gilliver
Brody Gillmore
Adam Gilmartin
Theodore Gilmour
Adam Gilson
Mike Gilson
Jessica Gioia
John Gipp
Matthew Gittings
Matt Gittins
Eric Givans
Mark Glen
Will Glynn
Gnushy
Dave Goddard
Mark Goddard
Harry Godden
Matt J Godden
Brock Godfrey
Dan Godfrey
Jack Godley
Christopher Goldasz
Stephanie Goldberg
Kieran Golding
Lucas Gonzales
Michael Gonzalez
Isaac Gooch
Emma Goodall
James Goodall
Elliot Goodban
Charlie Goodbody

Aiden Goode
Harry Goodin
Jack Goodlett
Rebecca Goodman
Ryanne Goodman
Thomas Goodman
Zak Goodwin
Alyssa Gordon
Dean Gordon
Thomas Gordon
Zack Gordon
Isaac Gordon-Smith
Abbie Gorlov-Webster
Thomas Gorman
Andrew Gosling
Ben Gosney
Patrick Götz
Bill Gould
Jacob Gould-Reddy
Alana Gow
Zach Goyette
Szymon Grabia
Wil Gradwell
Elliott Gragg
Alex Graham
Connor Graham
Dave Graham
David Graham
Jack Graham
Paul Graham
Kathryn Graham, Alex Wisz
Jan Friderik Grant
Oliver Grantham
Timothy Grassi
Alister Gray
Andrew Gray
Isabelle Gray
Jack ‘Daftlearner’ Gray
Jess Gray
Jordan Gray

Joshua Gray
Taylor Gray
Wrenn Gray
Richard Grayson
James Graystone
Julius Gražėnas
Chris Greaves
Alexander Green
Benjamin L Green
George Green
James Green
Jamie (AkeShushu) Green
Jessie Green
Josh Green
Joshua Green
Karen Green
Kristopher Green
Maxwell Green
Nathan Green
Shane Green
Zoe Green
Green
Tom Greenaway
Toni Greenaway
Aidan Greene
Brett Greene
Luke Greenhill
Q Greenslade
Jade Greentree~
Nathan Greenup
Lawrence Greenwich
Arthur Greenwood
Hope Greenwood
Jake Greenwood =D
Georgia Greer
Jack Greer
Mikkel Juel Gregersen
Noah Gregory
Riley Gregory
Matthew Greig

Holly Grey
Luc Grey
Alexander Grieves
Jared Griffin
Dawson Griffith
Will Griffith
Eliot Griffiths
Mike Griffiths
Molly Griffiths
Sam Griffiths
Sky Griffiths
Zea Griffiths
Sam Griffiths, Paige Griffiths
Jack Grigg
Benjamin Griggs
Dakota Grimes
Kiernan Grimes
George Grimley
Christopher Grimshaw
Ryan Grindley
Claire Grinham
Quinne Grizzell
Rory Grogan
Thomas Grosch
Elisha Groucutt
Murray Groves
Travis Groves
Dani Growcott
Emil Grundberg
Sadie Gudenswager
Ellys Gudger
Dave Guerin
Joris Guetens
Elaine Guinto
Andrew Guire
Ömer Güney
Konrad Gunshon
William Gunter
Janis Gürke
Cameron Gurwell

Timmy Gustavsson
Andrew Gutierrez
Sean Gutierrez
David Guzman
Scott Gygax
John Gynn
Violet H.
H.H.E H.H.E
Eirik Haagensen
Matthew Haahr
Zavannah Haave
Sam Hackett
Zak R Hacquard
Jack Hadfield
Abdul Hadi
Stephen Hadley
Charlie Haeussler
Caleb Hager
Edward “help I’m trapped in a book” Hagreen
Christoph Hahn
Tre Hahn
Alastair ‘Give me a cool Pseudonym’ Haig
Yoav Haimovitz
Joe Haley
Coire Halfpenny
Abbie Hall
Cameron Hall
James Hall
Jamie R. A. K. Hall
Josh Hall
Joshua Hall
Kallum Hall
Lucy Hall
Matthew Hall
Alfie Hallam
Jack Hallam
William Hallam
Jess Hallatt
Rob Hallatt
Pontus “ShadowMurloc” Hallenberg

Alyssa Hallinan
Cullen Halmstad
Corey Hamat
Garrison Hame
Andrew Hamilton
Andy Hamilton
Glenn Hamilton
Jamie Hamilton
Jennifer Rae Hamilton
Malachy Hamilton
Matthew Hamilton
Paul Hamilton
Russell Hamm
Stian Kjelstad Hammer
Leigh Hammersley
Kobi Hampshaw
Josh Hampton
Wild Hamsta
Liam Hancox
Kristian Handberg
Jacob Handslip
Peter Hanisek
Austin Hanna
Jonathan Hanna
Hannah
Joshua Hansard
Luke Hansard
Iain Hansen
Joe Hansen
Jonathan ‘Jackal’ Hansen
Louis hansen
Mark Hansen
Nicolaj Paw Hansen
Rasmus Kastbjerg Hansen
Brian Ch. Hanson
Christopher Hanson
Jim Hanson
Josh Hanson
Silje Warelius Hanssen
Simon Hansson

John Olav Haraldstad
Remi Harbo
Alfie Harbourne
Daisy Harbourne
David Hardie
Ethan F. Harding
Josh Harding
Rachael Harding
Will Harding
Zach Harding
Alan Hardman
Tobias Hardt
François Hardy
Jacob Hardy
Joel Hardy
Delta Harkshir
Kenny Harle
Andrea Harman
Rik Harmsen
Andrew Harn
Joseph Harper
Will Harper
Jack Harrington
Lewis Harrington
Anthony Harris
Iain Harris
Matt Harris
Oliver M Harris
Sharon Harris
Shaun Harris
Simon Harris
Alex Harrison
Cooper Harrison
Joel Harrison
Lachlan Harrison
Leila Harrison
Patrick Harrison
Nick Harrold
Greg Harrop
Harry ☆☆

Charlie Harrysson
Ian Hartley
Paul Hartramph
Bryn Harvey
Chris Harvey
Jack Harvey
Michael Harvey
Thomas Harvey
James Harvey (UnicornsOnLSD)
Jordan Harwood
Jordan Hass
Alexander Haswell
Moshe Hai Hatan
Tiarnan Hatchell
Ellie Hatten
Robyn Hatton-Pearson
Håkon Hauglid
Jacob Haulund
Niklas Jensen Haunstrup
Gary Haussmann
Kieran Havard
Corben Havener
Eythan Havens
Michael Hawken
Arthur D Hawkes
Luke Hawkes
Luna Hawkes
Didier Tuscan Hawkey
Jack Hawkins
Erik Hawkinson
Daniel Hawley
James Hawthorn
Cleo Hawthorne
Jack Hayden
Thomas Hayden
Hayden
Garry Haydon
John Hayes
Pookage Hayes
Thomas Hayes

Chris Haynes
Nicholas Hays
Joseph Heald
John Healey
James Heaney
Benjamin Heap-Webster
Ross Hearns
Elise Hearrell
Andrew Hearse
Fiona Heath
Howard Heath
Angus Hedger
Remy Hedley, Arnaud Lacomme
Hazel Hedrick
Erwin Heemsbergen
Conor Hegarty
Kinan Hegarty
Robyn Heib
Malte Heidenblut
Joost Heijnen
Glenn-Helge Heimdal
Nathan Held
Benjamin Helgen
Harry Hellyer
James Helm
Byron Helmrich
Ben Hemmings
Lewis Hemmings
Peter Hemmins
Robert D Hemsley
James Henaghan
Benjamin Hendel
Joseph Henderson
Riley Henderson
Talyn Henderson
Max Hendrix
Ewan Hendry
Noah Henneker
Ryan Hennings
Ina B. Henriksen

Cerys Henry
Patrick Henry
Alex Henshall
Paul Henty
Sandy Herbert
Sean Herbert
Andrew Herbison
Tim Hermansson
Sander Hermanussen
Stefán Hermundsson
Brielle Hernandez
J Gabriel Hernandez
Nick Hernandez
Thalia Hero
Alex Heron
James Heron
Dylan Herrmann
Sam Hesler (*poke*)
John Hesman
Nathan Hess-Nielsen
Logan Hesseling
Naomi Heuer
Alice Hewett
Kyle KaiKat Hewett
Philippe Hewett
Reilly Hewitson
Lee Heyes
HeyRoseKay
Jake Hibbert
River Hibbs
Adam Hicks
Charlie Hicks
Cole Hicks
Connor Hicks
David Hicks
Joel Hicks
Preston Hicks
Jim Hickson
James Hiett
David Higginbottom

Alex Higgins
Connor Daniel Higgins
Dawn Higgins
Max Higginson, Siobhan Mackie
Kat Higgs
Ella Highley
Lewis Higman Luke Thomas
Greg Hildebrandt
Adam Hill
Andy Hill
Brad Hill
Carly Hill
Darythe Hill
David Hill
Jacob Hill
Kyle Hill
Morgan Hill
Tyler Hill
Thomas Hill (keyword Confidential)
Bjarke Hillgaard
Jaime Hills
Ryan Hills
John Hinch
Jonathan Hinchliffe
Amelia Hindley
Alfie Hine
Dylan Hinnant
Chloe Hinojosa
Josh Hippe
Noah Hire
Callum Hirst
Julian Hirt
Jurriaan Hisschemoller
Adam Luke Hitchin (Again)
Peter Hobbins
Owain Hobbs
Leo Hobden
Justin Hockemeyer
Daniel Hocking
Justin Hodakowski

Kennedy (13 year subscription) Hodges
Matthew Hodges
Peter Hodgkinson
Olly Hodgkiss
Dan Hodgson
Douglas Hodgson
Gwendalynn Hodgson
Lasse Høeg
Sam Hoenes
Nate Hoffman
David Hoffmeyer
Daniel Hogan
A. Hogg
Patrick Hogg
Ambrose Hoilman
Jordan Holcroft
Christopher E Holden
Joshua Holden
Thom Holden
Daniel Holdsworth
Dave Holets
Emily R Holien, Damian R Holien
Kai Holland
Luke Holland
Daan Holleman
Hollow
James Hollowell
Connor Holmes
Dan Holmes
Joseph Holmes
Kote Holmes
Tom Holmes
Tommi Holmnäs, Johan och Rashi
Ariën Holthuizen-Fuld
Henrieke Holtmann
Isak R. Holtstam
Krotha Hones
Jonathan Honey
Lucas Hook
Matthew Hooten

Chloe Hope
Elis Hope
James Hopkins
Joshua Horan
Blake Horn
Charlotte Horne
Jeff Horne
Sam Horner
Ryan Horsley
Jakob Horvath
Romek Hos
Justin Hoss (Froggy)
Maz Hotchkiss
Eron Hoti
Finley Hough
Joe Hough
Zachary B. Houtman
Martin Hovin
Auden S. Howard
Harry Howard
Jill Howard
Joe Howard
Joseph Howard
Joseph D Howard
Liam Howard
Mike Howard
Nicholas Howard
Justin Chandler Howcroft
Hannah Howden
Elliot Howden-Roberts
Amy Howe
Jordan Howe
Jessica Howell
Matt Howell
Nathan Howell aka TheQuickTake
Mark Howells
Storey Howerter
Michael Howes
Joshua Howlett
Matthew Howlin

Callum Hoy, Peter Wallace
Jack Hoyle
Lachlan Hoyle, Jayden Hoyle
Matthew Hrehirchuk
Wesley “Yihuya” Hudgens
Alex Hudson
Fletcher Huelsemann
Gabriel Huffman
Aidan Hughes
Charlotte Hughes
Faith Hughes
Gavin Hughes
James Hughes
Keiran Hughes
Michael Hughes
Ryan Hughes
Samuel Hughes
Liam Hughes & Llinos Pritchard
Oscar Huglin
Mia Hull
William Hull
Evano Hulsman
Solimar Hultermans
Molly Hummerstone
Alix Humphrey
Michael Humphriss
Hundred Leaf Orchid
Hungry.eyes356
Gurinder Hunjan
George Hunt
Gus Hunt
James Hunt
Joel Hunt
Sam Hunt
Samantha Hunt
Sarah Hunt
Arthur Hunter
Cameron Hunter
Michael Hunter
Cameron Hunter-Spokes

Elliot Hurliman-Bates
Samantha Hurrell
Finlay Hurst
Asher Hurwood
Anders Husebø
Zakaria Hussain
Evelyn Huston
Julian (ChocoFudgelet) Hutchings
Brock Hutchinson
Ian Hutchison
Ralph Hyde
Azrael Hypo
Daniel Hyslop
Brennig Ifans
Miia Ikävalko
Niek Ilmer
Saff Imhoff
Adam Imms
Deegan Inbody
Dom Ingersole, Madison Byram
Seb Ingham
Connor Inglis
Martyn Ingram
Caitlin Iris Ings
Kinnera Inman
Dark Insanities
Mister InSayne
Bryson Interlandi
Max Irani
Corey Ireland
David Irgang
Chris Iriondo
Gavin Ironside
William Ironside
George Stanley Irving
James Irving
Alex Irwin
Sergio Isaac-Hardy
Reuben Isaacs
Emma Jacob Isaksen

Maxim Isban
Salem Iscariot
Jack Isle
Sam Istvan
It’sGwenActually
Sage ItsAMe
Sandis Ivanovskis (ExpCookie)
Martin Ivey
Chris Ivison
Iztari
Daniel Izzard
J.M.P.
J.S
Jannik Jablonski
Robbie Jack
Mark J Jackman
Casey Jackson
Harry Jackson
Jacob Jackson
Jonny Jackson
Karsten Jackson
Martin Jackson
Patrick Jackson
Sam Jackson
Jackson
Conagh Jackson-Cook
Vincent Jacob-Ferland
Mylo. J. Jacobs, Morgan Jacobs
Andrew Jacobson
Daniel Jacobsson
Aidan Jacques
Peter Jacques
Sidney Jacques
Natalie Jacques-Butterworth
Matthias Jaenicke
Aditya Jain
Jake
Rasmus Jakobsen
Ben James
Jayne James

Joshua James
Matt James
Mike James
Thomas James
James
Emmet James, Sterling James
Ryan Jamieson
Justin Jankunas
Alexander Janmo
Matthew Jannetta-Wilson
Freek Jansen
Julian Ruiz Jansen
Xavier Jansen
Yoeri Jansen
Mitchell Jaques
Mitchel G Jardell
Emil Järf
Zoe Jarman
Billy Jarvis
Connor Jarvis
Euan Jarvis
James Jarvis
Evan Jasinski
Jasiek Jasinski
Jason jc98
Casey Jay
Megan Jay
Siân Jay
Andrew Gerard Jayamaha
JayRey
Nick Jean
Jonathan Jebb
JecksTheFurry
Harry Jeffree
Philip ‘Pot’ Jeffree
Ruaridh Jeffrey
Stephen Jeffrey
Adelaide Victoria Jenkins
Cameron Jenkins
Sasha Jenkins

Samantha Jenks
Andy Jennings
Josh Jennings
Oliver Jennings
Patrick Jennings
Robert Jennings
Lisbet Jensen
Jeroen
Callum Jessamine
Christopher Jessup
Lucas Jew
Lillian Jewers
Boxuan Jiang
Sha (Sophia) Jiang
The Joda
Alex Joensen
Jamie Joggi (trashmonster)
Jacob John
John
Marjorie Johns
Adam “Don Lambo” Johnson
Alex Johnson
Bex Johnson
Daniel Johnson
Dyllon Johnson
Gabriel Johnson
Harvey Johnson
Jamie Johnson
Joey Johnson
Kevin Johnson
Marc Johnson
Matthew Johnson
Neil Johnson
Paul Johnson
Sabien Johnson
Terry Johnson
James Johnston
Logan Johnston
Ross Johnstone
Noora “Windy Silver” Jokela

Aaron Jones
Adam Jones
Alfie ‘Turbo’ Jones
Ashley “Alfor” Jones
Bethan Jones
Connor Jones
Dakoda Jones
Dan Jones
Dulcie Jones
Huw Jones
Jack Jones
James Jones
Joe Jones
Jon Jones
Josh O. Jones
Kyle Jones
Luca Jones
Luke Jones
Matthew Jones
Morgan Jones
Nathaniel Jones
Nicholas Jones
Rhys Jones
Rhys Jones
Sam Jones
Stacey Jones
Stephen “Slabhead” Jones
Suzi Jones
Taylor Jones
Lila Jones aka AtomicScratch
Joshua Jones II Electric Bugaloo
Louis Jones, Alfie Edwards-Wainwright
Daniel Jordan
Bailey Jordan-Hunter
Franziska Jörg
Tim Lund Jørgensen
David Jorgenson
Joey Josephson
Akhila Joshi
Babby Joyce

Jonas Judd
Hayden Judson
Caleb Julian
Harry Owen Jupp
Juraj
Justin
Kailas K
Anders Wolsing Kaa
László Kabódi
Suphanath Kaewboonruang
Kai
Joel Kalich
Mateusz Kalinowski
Tyler Kalmbach
Steven Kaltenegger
Kalzir
Jarrod Kamelski
Karaticat
Tomasz Karcz
Tanju Kardes
Alex Karel
Karl
Em Karlsson
Karman
Alexander ‘Kav’ Kashev
Kassiopeia
Rebecca Kath
Emily Kathryn Green, Zoe Rinoa Green
Katie The Cat & Her Papa, Nathan
Brady Katshor
Felix Katte
Katy and Luke
Elliot Kaunisto, Greyson Hope
Jere Kaunisto, Greyson Hope
Arjun Kaura
Cassandra Kavanagh
Jakub Kawecki
Adam Kay
Alex ‘Abomb’ Kay
David Kay

George Kay
Stephen Kay
Hannah Kaye
KayLastname
Kaylee with love from Max
Aodhán Keady
George Kearns
Stephanie Keating
Nathaniel Keegan
Aidan Keeling
Adrian Keen
Robert Keenan
Iain Keesee
Steven Keevil
Liam Keft
Liam Keft
Matthew Keily
Dylan Keir
Jim Keir
Charlie Keirl (Sexy Palpatine)
Aidan Keith
Brandon Keller
Derrick Kelley
Shaun Kelley
Tyler Kelley
Aaron Kelly
Dominic Kelly
Glen Kelly
Joshua Kelly
Mary Ann Kelly
Natalie Kelly
Will Kelsey
Cosmo Kemp
Ethan Kemp
Ryan-John Kemp
Connor C. Kemper
Nathaniel Kempson-Burns
James Kempster
Michael Kemsley
Christopher Kennard

Christina Kennedy
Ella ‘Luv’ Kennedy
Jo Kennedy
Michael Kennedy
Ryan Kennedy
Shem Kenneford
Hester Kenneison
Logan Kenny
Ryan Phipps Kenny
May Kenworthy
Ryan Kepper
Sebastian Kerebs
Tyler Kerekgyarto
Jaxom Kerlin
Nathan Kerns
Euan Kershaw
Mitchell Kershaw
Max Kettenhofen
Liam Kettley
Saadia Khalil
Kazeem Khatib
David Khoshnood
Ben Kidd
Tess Kievit
Toby Kill
Hana Kilty
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Caelan Kimball
Melanie Kimble
Dominic King
George King
Jamie King
John & Loz King
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Samuel King
Marcus Kingi
Robin Kingsley
Kayleigh Kingston
Ryan Kinloch
Douglas Kinnaman

Robin Kinnard
Samuel Kinns
Matt Kinsey
Andrew Kinsman
Tash Kinsman
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Nathan Kirby
Michael Kirchenstiner
Richard Kirk
Sean Kirk
Lyam Kirkham
Aidan Kirkup
Abigail Kirrin
Amar Kisoensingh
Joshua Kitchen
Aidan Kite
Matthew Kitson
Allan Kjærgaard
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Joshua Klein
Kellin Klein
Ronnie ‘look ma! I’m on a book!’ Klein
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Patrik Klems
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Andrew Klingele
Velin Klisurov
Eian Klock
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Felix Knight
Kaede Knight
Liam Knight
Matthew Knight
Michael Knight
Ryan Knight

Thomas Knight
Will Knight
Alex Knights
Matthew Knights
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Piotr Kowalski
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Howell Krampf
Maxime Kraus
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Harry Kullman
Kunyth
Sampo Kupiainen
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Atli L
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Ry L
James L (thought experiment enjoyer)
Kenny L.
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Jordy La Forge
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Helena Lambert
Luke Lambert
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Ian Lamm
Jordi Lamont
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Jack Lee
O. Lee
Owen Lee
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Zach Lee <3
Lee&LilyH
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Cole Lepper
Leroy Lesilolo
Phoenix Lestat
Gabe Lester
Damien Letham
Hemlock Leversha
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Kieran Levett
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Tracy Levitt
David Levy
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Lewi
Charlie Lewins
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Alex & Shannon Lewis
Anastasia Lewis
Beth Lewis
Chris Lewis
Christopher Lewis
Ciaran Lewis
Eliott Lewis
Euan Lewis
Jack Lewis
James Lewis
London Lewis
Lowri Lewis
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LinMac
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lirolake
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Adam Littlemore
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Haydn Lloyd
James Lloyd
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Paris Lloyd
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Ean Lombardo
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LPX-2154
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Maikel Lucas
Roberto Lucci
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Lucifer
Lucivilly
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Sander Luik
Lukascovitz

Tim Lukastik
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Aaron Lund
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Black Lung
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Dylan lynn
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Riley Macca
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Ewan Macdonald
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Jan Machálek
Stuart MacIntyre
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Matthew MacKarill
Jack MacKay
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Liam Mackenzie
Rowan Mackenzie
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Scott MacLeod
Ash MacLøød, Elastic Roentgen
Lewis MacNee
Josh Macom
Garrett Macomber
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Amy Maddison
Maddo
Mads, just Mads
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Jed Magee
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Enda Maginn
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Ian Maher
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Nathan Mallalieu
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Devin Mandelbaum
Mark Mandemakers
Tomáš Maněna
Dawson “Moose” Mangels

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McClay Manktelow
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Bradley Manson
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Linda Manstrogan
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Mathieu Marlaire
Lord Joshua Alex Marley
Luke Marley
Marmalade
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Hannah Marren
Christopher Marrero
Dylan Marriott
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Morgan Marshall
Callum Marston-Green
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Axl Mårtensson
Esther Martijn
Aeron Martin
Chad Martin

D Martin
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Francis Martin
Kate Martin
Lain Martin
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Jack Martin, Christopher Chisholm
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Antonie Martinovich van der Meer
Andres Martinson
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Oliver Marven
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Samantha Maskill
Luke Maslany
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Jack Mason
Megan-Rose Mason
Wolffe Mason
Zak Mason
Jonathan Massey
Sam Massey
Callum Massing
Emereld master333
Mark Matheisl
David Matkins
Nicholas Matrunich
Matt & The Retro Room
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Jonathan Matthews
Kit Matthews
Lloyd Matthews, Josh Arnott
Hayden Matthias
Sage Mattison
Chris Maundrell
Mike Maurer
Slagius MaximusIII

Patrick Maxted
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May/Bay Parker- The Genderfluid Paradox
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Dawood Mayet
Luci Mayflower
Charles Maynard
Zac Maynard
Joshua Mayo
Leo Mayr
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Amin Mazzieri
Dylan McAleer
Shaun McAlister
Andrew McAllister
Kierad McAllister
Lucas McAllister
Sophie McAllister
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Jason McCall
Nicholas McCall
Martha McCallum
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Liam McCammon
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Conor McCaul
Rose McCauley
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Kynan Mccolley
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Mac McCourt
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Kyle McCrossan
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Nicholas McDaniel
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David McDermott
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Zack (ZMCD) McDonald
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Ever McDowell
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Randy McGaffin
Ross McGarvey
Pigeon McGee
Declan McGhee
Leo McGibbon
Gwen McGinty
Joseph McGovern
Lewis McGrady
Connor McGrath
Spike McGrath
Andy McGregor
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Olivia McHugh
Allister Mcilwaine
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Dylan McIntyre
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Brendan McKiernan
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Cleo McNamara
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Cameron Mcnee
Mathew Mcnee
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Kelly Mcneil
Glen McNeill, Marianne Callistis
Jason McPherson
Keiran McQueen
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Me
Riley Meagher
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Mario Medina
Chase Medley
Reinis Gunārs Mednis
Meeksy
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Iikka Meriluoto
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Fiona Millar
Hugh Millard
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Ben Miller
Codey Miller
Dave Miller
Eilidh Miller
Gavin Miller
James Miller
Jared Miller
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Raul Miller
Reno Miller
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Gary Milne
Daniel Milnes
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Minerva&XYmir
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Jakob Miracle
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Jason Mitchell
Kit Mitchell
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Tom Mitchell
Moth Mitcheson
Mitskulp
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George Montgomery
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Lauren Montoya
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Glynn Moody
Noah Moody
Tom Moody-Stuart
Abigail Moon
Fiona Mooney
Ian Mooney

Jack Mooney
Luca Mooney
Andrew Moore
Callum Moore
Hallam Moore
Jonathan Moore
Kyle Moore
Preston Moore
Quinlan (Squiggly Line) Moore
Thomas Moore
Lily Moore!
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Conor Moorfield
Jess Moorhouse
Erin Moos-Golding
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Nathan Moran
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Jarrett Moreland
Brian Moreno
Ro Moreton
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Bradley Morgan
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Jâc Morgan
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Morkub
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Andrew Morris
Danny Morris
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Tristan Morris
Zackery Morris
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Ian Morrissey
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Robbie Mortimer
Jack Morton
Marsela Morton
Tobias Morton
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Lyall Mould
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Ollie Moules
Ryan Moulsley
Neil Mounter
Adam Mountford
Jack Mountford
William Mower
Jake Moyle
Ella Mozier
MrAceDucky
MrAndyTF
MrDeathLad
MrTurtleBiscuit - Dylan Amos
MrZijnd
William Mucklow
Devon Mugford
Daniel Muggli
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Ewan Muir, Libby (Sketchflux) Wilson
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Nevin Mullen
Jeffery Mullenix

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Matthew Mulligan
Brian Mullin
Jacob Mullin
Florian Müllner
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Matt and Fi Munro-Legg
Dave (Diotior) Munro, Mieke Munro
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Ian Murphy
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Tina Murray
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Naff!! <3
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Juan Najera
Naki
Evelyn Jane Nash
Maxim “stealing is wrong, Jean” Nash
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Joshua Nathaniel
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Carlo Navato
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Sir Uncle Ned
Arran Neilly
Yui Neko
Barry Nel
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Jared Nelson
Kara Nelson
Michael Nelson
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Markus Nesse
Oliver Netzthaler
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Jarrod Newberry
Ian Newborn
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Will Newlands
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Morgan Duna Nichs
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Angus Noble
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Noël
Dalen Noice
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Tristan Nolan
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Nomega
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Rasmus Nørby
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Mads Luther Nørlem
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Hayley & Chris Norman
Justin Norman
Peter Norman
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Kirk Northrop
Dillan Norton
Erran Norton
Lucas Norton

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Dylan O'Connor
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Lily O'Connor
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James O'Hare
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John O'Neal
Daragh O'Neill
Devin O'Neill
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James O'Sullivan
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Zoey Oakley
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Joe Oatley
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Tomasz Obuchowski
Octanas
Travis Odinzoff
Yama Holmgren Ödman

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Isabella Oliveira
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Ian Oliver
Luke Oliver
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Wyatt Olney
Ryan Olson
Par Olsson
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Jack Opie
Luke Opie
Johannes Opperer
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Freddie Osborne
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Olumide Osikomaiya
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Morrison Outlaw
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Josh Overland
Evan Overly

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Tyler P.
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Simon Paffett
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Joe Page
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Brendon Paine
Paint
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Locust Pallett
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Daniel Palmer
Jared Palmer
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Velrisa Palmerton
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Leon Pan
Hazel Panchal
Pandaman144 (AdamCallighan-Davison)
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Cassidy Parker
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Joe Parker
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W.H. Parker
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Grey Patterson
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Thomas Pedersen
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Aaron Penny, Joel Penny
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Lexi Petry
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Cate Phillips
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Sam Phillips
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Sean Pincott
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Mandy Pine
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Hazel Bee Pines
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Tonie Platten
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PlumpChimp
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Ethan Podmore
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Andrew Pointon
Poky
Sander Pol
Benjamin Polan
Jacob Polomchak
Michael Polzin
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Neil Ponsonby
Steve Pont
Liam Poole
Andrew Poor
Harry Pope
Stephen Pope
Sasha Popenko
Thomas Porada
Ross Porteous

Stacey Porteous
Andrew Porter
Ben Porter
Evie Porter
Jorden Porter
Keith Porter
Madison Porter
Owen Portier
Charlie Posey
Joel Postma
Jorg Pot
Yannick Pot
James Potham
Jack Pottage
Andrew Potter
Artemis Potter
Ben Potter
Dylan Potter
Elise Potter
Samantha Potter
Timothy Potter
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Jonathan Potton
Scarlett Potts
Benjamin Poulson
Baz Poulton
Connor Pouton
Shane Powell
T. Powell
Jamie Power
Lyle Power
Benjamin Powers
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Braden Prather
Josh Pratt
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Simon Prentice
Michael Presson
John Preston
Joseph Preston

Karen Preston
Michael Preston
Nathan Preston
Sam Preston
Harry Price
Mathew Price
Ruby Price
Samantha Price
Eli Price and Harry the snake
Zoey Pridan
Lea Pridgeon
Jonathan Prince
Max Prior
Amy Pritchard
Jonathan Pritchard
Stephen Pritchard
Tara Pritchard
William Proctor
Zachary Proctor
Nick Proellochs
Carl Proffit
Frank Provoost
Kevin Pryke
Jake Puddephatt
Rick Pufky
Lilly Pugh
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Matthew Pull
Cat Pulley-Howard
Benjamin Punte
Joshua Purdy
Gerwin Puttenstein
Jonjo Pymm
Pyromidgit
Allie Qpzm
Joseph Quagliata
Harry Quartermaine
Quartzshard
Brandon Que
Moritz Quester

Quiet
Eamonn Quigley
James Quilliam
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Patrick Quinn
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Adam R H
Ra_Wolfbane
Amélie Raats
Rose Rachel
Jordan Rackham
Luke Rackstraw
Lumi Raczyńska
Duncan Radband
Greg Rademaekers
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Drew Radley
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Adam Rafferty
Raghallaigh
Ryan Rai
Blake Rainbow
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Oscar Ramage
Martynas Ramanauskas
Rahul Ramkumar
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James Ramplin
Jack Ramsay
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Omraj Rana
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Jamie Randall
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Oisín Regan
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Phil Reid
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The King Family
The Zero Monkey
theBluePukeko
TheKentishDan
thekrimzonthief
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Daniel Hardcastle (1989–2116) started his career playing video games on YouTube in 2011, and is surprisingly still doing that, as well as live streaming, podcasting, and all sorts of things that aren't real jobs. Additionally he's written several books, (*Fuck Yeah, Video Games, The Paradox Paradox,* that secret next book he's not talking about yet), starred in a film that somehow has a 100 per cent score on *Rotten Tomatoes* despite his acting (*Ashens and the Polybius Heist*), and beaten *Malenia, Blade of Miquella* in *Elden Ring* (after 260 attempts). Next up he'll probably make a video game, write a 'Doctor Who' audio adventure, or simply rescue more chickens to add to his flock. His BMI is 29.

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Footnotes

Chapter Six: The Universe's Choice

fn1 My scans indicate that you glossed right over the date at the start of the last chapter, and now have no idea how far into the future we are now. Brilliant. Well done. This, if you haven't already worked it out, is a story about **time travel**. Why are you expecting to follow the narrative without paying attention to the **time** part? Thinking about it, you should probably take this book back and pick up something that's more your speed. May I suggest *The Very Hungry Caterpillar: Particularly Big Font Edition*?

fn2 Although … the less said about that first contact, the better …

fn3 Simply wearing it was a struggle, as it weighed many kilograms. Mercifully, it had anti-gravity built right into the chain, so that it didn't decapitate a leader every time they sneezed.

fn4 Doors in the future are automatic, silent, and sweep in from the left and right, forming an air-tight seal as they shut. These provide two major advantages over the type that slide in from the top of the door frame. One, you're far less likely to be concussed when walking through it, and two, the people in the flat above don't have to deal with your door occasionally crashing through their kitchenette.

fn5 Unbound Technologies takes no responsibility for any personal humiliation that may occur as a result of taking this assertion literally.

fn6 In the twenty-first century, most glass was made from silica, with a bit of sodium carbonate and lime (the rock, not the fruit) sprinkled in for good measure. In the twenty-eighth century, the majority of new glass was constructed from a woven diamond nanothread. Visually it was identical. Structurally, it was like comparing a dry cracker with a bulletproof metal. Oh sure, you could still put a cricket ball through this new glass, but that ball would need to be about forty times bigger and going several thousand miles per hour which, at the time of writing, severely breaches several Galactic Cricketing Federation etiquettes.

fn7 To Alphonse's knowledge, only Osheen and Morag ever wrote things down on paper and, as this was legible, Alphonse correctly assumed that it didn't belong to the onboard medical professional.

Chapter Five: The Flight of the Paracosm

fn8 This is not an invitation. Put the pen down immediately.

Chapter Seven: Teamwork by Technicality

fn9 In the twenty-eighth century, HD is classified as 15360 x 8640 pixels. Videophiles cannot enjoy a film unless they can see its actors down to the atomic level.

fn10 Unlike the majority of Superior Reality game developers, a scathing review wouldn't hurt the creator of *Yip Attack: Re-encountering*. The award-laden Mike Bithell, now a disembodied brain wired directly into an old PC with a rusty scart cable, hadn't cared for the thoughts of mortals since around the time he released *Tron: Identity*.

fn11 He was also on the cover.

fn12 In the twenty-eighth century nobody bats an eyelid unless you're at least quintuply titted.

fn13 Almost 90 per cent of all experiments attempting to combat this ended up with at least one scientist being devoured by angry, sentient plant life.

fn14 While most of the flora and fauna on the ship were real living plants and creatures, the designers of these starships decided against the use of actual insects. Literally nobody has ever complained about this.

fn15 A tight one between assorted cookware and a floating ball of metal that occasionally sneezed.

Chapter Eight: All Creatures Great and Small

fn16 The upside of having the structural integrity of a lit firework is that they've become an incredibly peaceful race. For a Plofbare, the concept of war is so far in their past that it's largely forgotten. In fact their wars were over so incredibly quickly and decisively due to explosive chain reactions that the only record of them even happening is through the massive craters that they left. Ask a Plofbare historian about any battles of historical significance and they're likely to just shrug.

fn17 During her final medical exams, Morag was docked several points for her poor bedside manner. However, rumour has it that she ended up passing because her test patient, a cadaver, made a full recovery.

Chapter Nine: The Cerebral Slammer

fn18 Coincidentally, this was the very same message that the Tectato displayed after killing and dismembering every member of its entire model starship club a few months prior. That sounds bad, and it is, but as the Tectato are sentient plant life, the aftermath of the murders was no gorier than someone playing 'He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not' with a handful of daisies. Sure, it's a tragedy,

but the guy who mops the crime scene down afterwards got to go home at lunch.

fn19 At the dawn of their species, millions of years ago, the Besalt existed entirely in the molten core of their home world, oblivious to anything outside of their rocky sky. As their civilisation expanded, the sheer pressure cracked the planet in two, sending their entire species into the universe. Nowadays, the Besalt use 'birthing stars', of which Terbraxia is one, to keep their new-borns warm through childhood. All Besalt have happy memories from that time, splashing about in all the molten hydrogen that they could ever want. Not many sleepovers with friends from other species though.

Chapter Ten: Twinkle

fn20 While it's embarrassing to call someone accidentally from a phone in your pocket, it's way more embarrassing to sit on your main control station and accidentally fling yourself into a star.

Chapter Four: Moondust

fn21 Aldrin University, the second largest of the moon's higher education campuses, contained the largest interplanetary flight school in the entire solar system. If you wanted to learn how to get a ship from Planet A to B without suffocating, burning up, or crashing into Planet C, this was the place for you. Forty-five landing pads, three control towers and a fleet of modern ships were ready to train up the next generation of pilots, with a success rate so high that a few students who didn't even take the course passed it. Students there called it 'The Captain Factory'. Not the best name; most of the students eventually became admirals. Anyway, none of that really matters as Eureka and Lily attended the third largest of the moon's higher education campuses, Collins University.

Chapter Eleven: Tomorrow, Six Hundred Years Later

fn22 Instead of all that complicated left and right hemispheres business, the Plofbare simply have two brains. The secondary brain is for socialising, creative works, and humming small tunes to yourself, and the primary is for learning, focus and the ability to rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time. Most Plofbare only activate the primary brain when necessary, and double headaches *really* suck.

fn23 Morag didn't say 'fucking'. Compared to the Plofbare word that Morag used, 'fucking' is tame, polite even. Honestly, the word Morag used is so vile that this could have said 'cuddling' and it be no further from the word's

offensiveness than ‘fucking’.

fn24 Nanobots are rechargeable, but it takes bloody ages, especially as you likely need three goes to get the connector in the right way around.

Chapter Twelve: Fruit Juice

fn25 Scientifically so, thanks to a galaxy-wide study in the 2300s.

fn26 For those of you worrying about the safety of local wildlife, rest assured that this isn’t real chocolate. In fact, it wasn’t real pastry. The majority of food eaten in the 2700s was manipulated, artificial proteins, perfectly taste- and texture-mapped to be identical to the real thing. The only change was that all allergens were totally removed, and that your NPC monitored vitamin and nutrition levels, so that if you’d happen to eat nothing but kebab and chips for a week, the second half of them would have the exact same fat, salt and sugar count as a small bowl of salad and a glass of water. Some argue that this isn’t the same as eating ‘real’ food, and they’re right. It’s much, much better.

fn27 As the human race abandoned the idea of countries and started to work together, a worldwide team of linguists was recruited to make a new, perfect language for future generations to call their own. It had to be robust, malleable, and simple to learn, all while ditching fiddly bits like gendered grammar, overly long words, and spellings so complicated that you’d run entire competitions dedicated to getting them right. After several years, the new language was born and schools began teaching it. A decade or so later it was abandoned, and English became the official language of the human race. Oh sure, English is broken, abuseable, and has words so egregious that they mean both themselves and the opposite of themselves, but that didn’t matter in the end. What did matter was that Marvel’s films were in English, all seven hundred of them needed to be seen before the new ones, and nobody likes a dub.

fn28 Doctor 140 was played by a hologram of David Tennant to critical acclaim.

fn29 Affinity Standard Time, which is exactly the same as GMT, has been adopted as the du jour way of telling the time. Before Earth joined the Affinity, each species kept time in their own way. Due to their habitat being inside their homeworld instead of on top of it, the Besalt never really cottoned on to the whole spinning planets malarkey. In the olden days, they simply selected a deceased family member, counted their lifespan as one unit of time, and that was that. For example:

‘How long until the party?’

‘0.000000175 Grandfathers.’

That had a few, quite obvious problems, many of which were admittedly resolved after the posthumous election of Zircon Fletcher as the Grandfather

Supreme. Elsewhere in the galaxy, the Tectato had units based on how long it takes soil acidity to fade; intrinsic knowledge to them, but if the grass on the other side was greener, chances are their clocks were different too. The Fibril Blue can internally oscillate at various frequencies; however, they can have varying results if the Fibril Blue in question is particularly nervous or cold. The Plofbare gave up on timekeeping entirely, as the invention of the alarm clock wiped out a large portion of their workforce in a matter of weeks.

Chapter Thirteen: The Poison in the Heart

fn30 Sadly for the Clive, their existence began in the Andromeda Galaxy, which teems with life in the same way a sterile, empty test tube does. In response to this crushing loneliness, the Clive came up with the idea of viciously bombing their own dead planets from orbit. The resulting hemisphere-sized glass crater could be used as a massive parabolic reflector, a useful tool when searching for the tiniest signs of life in other galaxies. However, as the resulting reflector is so sensitive to light and sound, great care must be taken during any and all maintenance procedures on its surface. This is exemplified most by a recent incident on their third largest mirror, when an untimely fart gave an entire operating crew a severe case of PTSD.

Chapter Fourteen: Crossing That Rubicon

fn31 Sharing thoughts to communicate is a difficult skill to master, but essential for stealth communication. Taught at a basic level in schools, students pass the subject if they communicate with a teacher with a maximum allowance of three rogue thoughts. Further education allows students to hone this skill, and to raise the difficulty they must pass without a single rogue thought, and a really, really attractive examiner.

fn32 The Besalt communicate by internally crashing ‘vocal rocks’ into each other, like if the hammers on a piano were hitting a second set of hammers coming the other way. Translating the resulting noise is difficult, not even taking into account the linguistic dissimilarities between Besalt and English. Translating that noise into English, then realising that the speaker is using an archaic secondary language of the planet, one of more than 7,000, and then having to work out if they need that translating or if it’s just a vocal flourish … look, all I’m saying is that the designers of universal translators are *severely* underappreciated.

fn33 Thanks to incredible work in the field of exotic engineering, a single power cell in the twenty-eighth century could power an entire country of twenty-first century Earth for an entire year, or a mobile phone from the same era playing a video game for about ten hours.

Chapter Fifteen: Day One

fn34 By the twenty-eighth century the entire concept of money had gone the way of the elephant, so this fabric wasn't considered expensive due to a monetary value, it was expensive because several highly talented specialists in several tricky fields worked their tuchuses off for weeks on end to produce the materials for it. If anything, in 2783, 'expensive' just means 'fiddly to replace'.

fn35 In Eureka's time food replication was still in its infancy, and had been for some time. Sure, you could hit a button and receive a bar of something that tasted a bit roast dinner-y, but an entire diet of them wasn't recommended. For one, they glued your teeth together like nobody's business, and for another, there were only three flavours, and none of them were supposed to taste anything remotely like a roast dinner.

fn36 Osheen is a member of three separate niche groups that celebrate the use of projectors in the workplace. One of them is called 'Pro-jectors' and honestly I feel sick thinking about it.

fn37 Imagine a fuzzy slinky and you're about a third of the way there.

fn38 She'll get off on a technicality though. By the time Moses chips all his rules into stone, the statute of limitations will be well over.

fn39 In the twenty-eighth century, Robertson is the standard screw head type, and the galaxy is better for it.

fn40 Kez is thinking of King Charles III.

Chapter Fifteen: Day One

fn41 By the twenty-eighth century the entire concept of money had gone the way of the elephant, so this fabric wasn't considered expensive due to a monetary value, it was expensive because several highly talented specialists in several tricky fields worked their tuchuses off for weeks on end to … Hang on, haven't I told you this before?

fn42 You try getting stretched out across spacetime without seeing demons.

fn43 For the longest time, sport was the domain of the genetic freaks. Training and skill could get you so far, but if you're up against someone with gills you can kiss goodbye to gold in the 200 m breaststroke. Then, in the early 2400s, sporting events changed. Instead of competing against a group of people inexplicably sorted by such archaic structures such as 'gender' and 'legs', you competed against the only opponent worthy of your time. Yourself.

Before an event, your genetic code is sequenced, simulations run, and out pops the very best time/distance/however they score gymnastics that you could ever hope to achieve. You'll never beat it,

but that's the point. It's about how close you can get to your very best. Sure, the guy in front of you may be three seconds faster, but if you're at 99.9% of your optimum performance, you'll be taking home the medals. Anyway, I bring this up because Theo got drunk for the first time before his race and ended up placing not only behind all of his peers, but behind the guy who comes out to take the hurdles in afterwards as well.

Chapter Sixteen: The Universe's Second Choice

fn44 'Mr Blobby' by Mr Blobby.

fn45 Psalm 34:18, New Affinity Edition.

fn46 A lovely star system, Wolf 359. Only one inhabited planet, so not a lot of traffic, yet the bustling Sol system is a mere hour away by shuttle. Quiet yet accessible, it really is the best of both worlds.

Chapter Seventeen: Mud Bath

fn47 Many of Aradisi's resorts are ultra-specialised to a single gender, body-type, or favourite *Double Fine* video game to maximise the relaxation of your stay. In fact, Aradisi not only offers the only spa exclusively built for genderfluid people in the galaxy, but various relaxation options for gendergas, and genderplasma visitors as well.

fn48 Neo-new-age is a remarkable genre of music, taking the classic ambient vibes of new-age and making it longer and even calmer. Many neo-new-age tracks are performed by baby butterflies, gently brushing against various instruments. One of the more popular pieces, 'Dreaming of Dreamy Dreams', contains just three notes in its half-hour run time, and two of them are in the intro.

fn49 Ploove (noun): Vulgar slang – Tectato insult, primarily aimed at someone who has overwatered themselves.

Chapter Eighteen: Goodbye and Goodnight

fn50 Star 2MASS J1941-4602 very nearly did get a 'proper' name just before Kez was born in the early 2700s. After several knockout rounds of voting, the name 'Barry' was selected by the local populace. Then, after about a week of use, everyone decided they hated it and went back to the original. Sorry to any Barrys reading this. It is what it is.

fn51 Clives, despite all being identical, can tell each other apart by name

alone. However, this only works when the name is spoken, not written down, so while their home planet is wonderful for conversation, it's an awful place to deliver post.

Chapter Nineteen: The Death of Venus

fn52 In order of orbits from the sun, not actual distance. Mercury is, on average, closer to Earth, but that's just a fluke of orbital geometry and only interesting to the sort of nerd who already knew it.

fn53 The Venus heat shield was an incredible piece of engineering. In just eight years, Venus was transformed from a planet whose surface could melt lead into one that only felt like that to the workers in full protective gear.

fn54 If Eldritch horrors exist, they're on the ninth row of the periodic table.

Chapter Twenty: The Declaration

fn55 Besalt biology is unique in the universe, as it's the only example of evolution phoning it in. With all these sexes flying about, nature just yelled 'sod it' and allowed anyone to procreate with anyone else. During sex, both parties fling out sperm, eggs, pollen, primordial goo, and anything else their bodies have conjured up that day. Also, as Besalt revert to their original size to reproduce, the clean-up afterwards takes fucking ages.

Chapter Twenty-One: Stomping Grounds

fn56 It was also Christmas number one in 1993.

Chapter One: Harker

fn57 His three-person team was made up of himself and two chickens he'd trained to spot anagrams of famous rivers.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Resignation

fn58 Baxter particularly hated ambassadors. When two planets wanted to strengthen relations, out they came, one from each side, Baxter in tow to oversee the meeting. The ambassadors would meet, have a meal together, get along over a shared love of diplomatic procedure, and before too long they would be under a duvet, strengthening relations, more often than not in the hotel room next to his. On more than one occasion Baxter had thought about calling reception to complain, even if that meant the start of an interstellar

war.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: How Hard Can It Be?

fn59 In Sol's asteroid belt, good-sized asteroids are about 1 million kilometres from each other and not, as TV and films would lead you to believe, six feet apart.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: How Hard It Can Be

fn60 This chant, popularised by one of the greatest wrestlers of all time, Bryan Danielson, is still used by fans after a particularly brutal move is performed. In a recent match for the Milky Way Championship of the World, fans exploded into this chant after The Fibril Bastard put TectaWOAH through a flaming table at two times the speed of light.

Chapter Thirty-One: 'Til The End of The End of Time

fn61 Unknown to Hyacinth, the skin had been edible for millions of years by now. Oddly, it tasted exactly like those foam banana sweets you'd find in a pick-and-mix.

fn62 Hey, no need to get personal.